

**Undoing Apartheid, Becoming Children:  
Writing the Child in South African Literature**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the trope of the child in South African literature from the early years of apartheid to the contemporary moment. The chapters focus on some of the most established and prolific authors in South African literary history and roughly follow a chronological sequence: autobiographies by the exiled *Drum* writers (Es'kia Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane) in the early 1960s; Nadine Gordimer's writing during the apartheid era; confessional novels by Afrikaans-speaking authors (Mark Behr and Michiel Heyns) in the transitional decade; and J. M. Coetzee's late and post apartheid works. I argue that, while writing from diverse historical and political positions in relation to South Africa's literary culture, these authors are all in one way or another able to articulate their subjectivities—with their underlying ambiguities, contradictions, and negations—by imagining themselves *as* the child or */and through* childhood. My analyses of the works under discussion attend to the subversive and transformative potential of, and the critical energies embedded in the trope of the child, by investigating narrative reconfigurations of temporality and space. Firstly, I will be looking at the ways in which the images, structures, and aesthetics making up the imaginings of the child disrupt a linear temporality and serve as critique of a teleological historiography of political emancipation and the liberation struggle. Secondly, I will pay attention to the spatial relations with which representations of the child are bound up: between the country and the city, black townships and white suburbs, the home and the street. By attending to specific transgressions and reorderings of these spatial relations, my reading also explores the ways in which spatial underpinnings and ideological boundaries of national identities are contested, negotiated, and restructured by forces of the transnational, the diasporic, and the global around the figure of the child.

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## Introduction

On the occasion of his first state-of-the-nation address to the Houses of Parliament on 24 May 1994, Nelson Mandela, the country's first democratically elected leader, read Afrikaner poet Ingrid Jonker's poem 'The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga'.

The child is not dead  
the child lifts his fists against his mother  
who shouts Africa!...

The child is not dead  
Not at Langa nor at Nyanga  
nor at Orlando nor at Philippi  
where he lies with a bullet through his brain...

the child is present at all assemblies and law-giving  
the child peers through the windows of houses  
and into the hearts of mothers  
this child who only wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga  
is everywhere

the child grown to a man treks on through all Africa  
the child grown to a giant journeys  
over the whole world  
without a pass!<sup>1</sup>

The poem was originally composed in the aftermath of the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March 1960, when the South African police opened fire on the crowd of anti-pass law protestors in the eponymous black township, south of Johannesburg. This watershed event in South African history was followed by further demonstrations in the same year in Langa and Nyanga townships in

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson Mandela, 'State of the Nation Address by the President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela', <<http://www.anc.org.za/content/state-nation-address-president-south-africa-nelson-mandela>> [accessed 14 August 2017]

Cape Town, which directly gave rise to the writing of Jonker's poem. Inspired by the poet's visit to the Philippi police station, where she saw the body of a black child who had been shot dead in his mother's arms during an anti-pass demonstration, the poem evoked the shocking image of brutality against children that was to become a prominent symbol in the iconography of anti-apartheid struggle. In the Soweto Uprising that began on 16 June 1976, when approximately 20,000 high school students marched onto the streets protesting the imposition of Afrikaans-medium instruction in local schools, the police again shot into the crowd, this time directly at the children. The 13-year-old Zolile Hector Pieterse, one of the first students to be shot dead, was captured in journalist Sam Nzima's famous photograph. The image of the dead boy being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo, with Hector's sister Antoinette Sithole running beside them, appeared in newspapers worldwide and became, in an instant, a globally iconic image revealing the extremity of apartheid's brutalities and the intensity of the anti-apartheid struggle. Former president of the African National Congress (ANC) Oliver Tambo, in his opening speech at the International Conference on Children, Repression, and the Law in Apartheid South Africa held in Harare in September 1987, again turned to the symbolism of the dying black child as a rallying cry for the demise of the apartheid regime. Also quoting Jonker's poem at the beginning of his speech, Tambo said, 'the mangled remains of the black child who wanted only to play in the sun are justification for the existence of the largest and most sophisticated machinery of repression that Africa has ever known'.<sup>2</sup>

Contextualized in the hopeful moment of the nation's democratic transition, Mandela's reference to Jonker's poem in his speech, however, seems to pivot not so much on the image of the child under violent abuse, which is a disturbing reflection of historical realities,<sup>3</sup> as on the symbolic resonance of the child

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<sup>2</sup> *Children of Resistance: Conference on Children, Repression and the Law in Apartheid South Africa: Papers*, ed. by Victoria Brittain and Abdul S. Minty (London: Kluwer, 1987), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> For a report on relevant statistics about human rights violation of children during apartheid, see Piers Pigou, 'Children and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in *Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation*, ed. by Sharanjeet Parmar and others (Cambridge:



revived by the power of Jonker's poetic imagination.<sup>4</sup> In the poem, this child who is not dead comes back to the adult world, attending the public sphere, at assemblies and legislations, while also appearing in the private, domestic space, through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers. Nevertheless, rather than celebrating his prospective full participation in this adult world, the child seems to stand uncannily on guard against it. The conventional pattern of a *Bildungsroman* in which a child grows into an adult from birth to death is subverted here into the story of a child, who bypasses the adult world of politics, legal orders, and familial institutions, leading his own way from the dead to the living. The subversive potential embedded in the child figure is delivered through the poetic reconfigurations of time and place. It is about a present stuck in the moment of a child's death being transgressed by the imagining of the child's resurrection and his growth into a giant—an orientation towards open and emerging futures with unbounded possibilities. It is also about the confines of place within which the child's dead body lies being overcome by the poetics of the child's mobility to be everywhere, through all Africa and over the whole world.

Corresponding to the child's journey, which is suggestive of a vision of subversive resilience and transformative potentiality, is the journey of the poem itself beyond the poet's own premature death in 1965 at the age of 31, when she committed suicide by drowning herself in the sea at Three Anchor Bay in Cape Town. Figuring as a rebellious daughter against her domineering father, Abraham, former leading National Party member once in charge of censorship laws, Jonker projected onto 'The Child' an image of herself, who used the poetic imagination as a form of empowerment to stand up to the patriarchal order in her personal life and in the wider political world. After its first publication in *Contrast* in 1961 in its original Afrikaans, the poem's English and isiZulu

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Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 115-57.

<sup>4</sup> Mandela's abridged version of the poem removed the first two lines in the third stanza: 'the child is the shadow of the soldiers/ on guard with guns saracens and batons'. The omission of military imageries seems to suggest this shift of focus from violent struggle in the past to non-violent democratic nation-building in the future.

translations subsequently appeared in *Drum* magazine in 1963. Besides its most widely known English translations in two of Jonker's published anthologies, one by Jack Cope and William Plomer in 1968 and the other by André Brink and Antjie Krog in 2008, the poem was also broadcast in English on the BBC, and translated into German, French, Dutch, Polish, and Hindi.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the global appeal of 'The Child' in its various translations, the poem also travelled across time, adapting to different historical situations with changing meanings. Arising out of the revolutionary fervour around the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre that triggered the apartheid state's first State of Emergency, the poem proceeded to bear witness to the mood of exigency in Tambo's speech in 1987 near the end of the second State of Emergency, and subsequently to the optimistic spirit permeating Mandela's speech at the birth of the new rainbow nation in 1994. Mandela's use of the poem also rekindled a wide interest in the poet, whose dramatic life was reimaged in numerous plays, documentaries, and films. It is as if the child within the poem somehow envisions the afterlife of the poem itself and offers a way to reflect upon its own potentialities from beyond the literary work and the mortality of the poet. Emerging from the heart of the nation's history of political struggle, the trope of the child, as illustrated by the history of Jonker's poem, points to the ambiguous nature and the potentialities of literary discourse in general and mirrors the contingencies of historical narrative and national historiography per se—a message that still speaks to us today more than twenty years after Mandela's speech, when sentiments of hope have gradually been eroded by growing disillusionment with the post-apartheid state.

This thesis is an examination of the child figure in South African literature that works through some of the issues I have raised in relation to Jonker's poem. Bringing the poetic vision of 'The Child' to close readings of narrative prose works, my analyses of the selected autobiographies and fictions under

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Cope, 'The World of Contrast', *English in Africa*, 2 (1980), 1-21 (p. 14). For a more recent account of the political and cultural history of the poem, see Louise Viljoen, *Ingrid Jonker: the Poet under Apartheid* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), pp. 62-9.

discussion in what follows attend to the subversive and transformative potential of, and the critical energies embedded in the trope of the child, by investigating narrative reconfigurations of temporality and space. Firstly, I will be looking at the ways in which the images, structures, and aesthetics making up the imaginings of the child disrupt a linear temporality and serve as critique of a teleological historiography of political emancipation and the liberation struggle. Secondly, I will pay attention to the spatial relations with which representations of the child are bound up: between the country and the city, black townships and white suburbs, the home and the street. By attending to specific transgressions and reorderings of these spatial relations, my reading also seeks to examine the ways in which spatial underpinnings and ideological boundaries of national identities are contested, negotiated, and restructured by forces of the transnational, the diasporic, and the global around the figure of the child.

This thesis will focus on some of the most established and prolific authors in South African literary history, including Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, Mark Behr, and J. M. Coetzee. The chapters roughly follow a chronological sequence from the *Drum* decade in the 1950s up to the point of Coetzee's 2013 novel *The Childhood of Jesus*. I have chosen these works and writers not because they are in any way representative of the ethos of any particular historical period or constitutive of a national literary culture. I see these literary texts, instead, as significant discursive sites where varieties of political and rhetorical commitments, intersecting ideologies, and competing epistemological currents are at work with one another. These systems and paradigms of intellectual, ideological, and literary discourses are incorporated synchronically in each chapter that focuses on a specific period, a specific writer or mode of writing, while they also, diachronically, generate varieties of reverberating responses and appropriations from various works, authors, and historical periods.

The thrust of my argument is that, while writing from diverse historical and political positions in relation to South Africa's literary culture, these authors are

all in one way or another able to articulate their subjectivities—with their underlying ambiguities, contradictions, and negations—by imagining themselves *as* the child or/and *through* childhood. In line with this, when it comes to a topic of reading literary texts produced from a context with particularly imperative political demands, the overarching theoretical questions I keep asking throughout the thesis are about the politics of literary imagination at large. By attending to narrative techniques and formal experimentations in the selected literary texts, my discussion of the complex relationship between their 'literary' qualities and political engagements aims to illuminate, however briefly, the ways in which literary discourse partakes of political life in the imaginative refashioning of selfhood and subjectivity.

This project is first and foremost indebted to scholarship in South African literary studies, with a special attentiveness to methodological enquiries regarding the problem of reading the specific local and historical circumstances in South Africa through theories, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories in particular, produced in 'Northern' institutions.<sup>6</sup> Instead of relying on conceptual formulations to account for literary work, my basic approach is to bring the affective power of literary discourse into mutually constructive dialogue with theoretical insights and to explore the ways in which literary narrative complicates or ameliorates theory. The specific questions I raise in each chapter, conceptual or historical, are all derived from reading the literary texts, and from figuring out the formal features that give rise to various literary figurations of the child. Based on this approach, I am also interested in the ways in which postcolonial and poststructuralist critics and theorists, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan, also use the child figure as a metaphor of critique in their conceptual formulations. By way of focusing on the trope of the child, I wish to illuminate the metaphorical qualities and figurative expressions of the related theoretical texts

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Chapman gives an incisive critique of the problematics of what he calls the post- paradigm criticism in South African literary studies. See Michael Chapman, 'Postcolonial Problematics: A South African Case Study', *Research in African Literatures*, 42(2011), 60-71.

themselves—traits they share with literary texts to generate enduring critical energies. With this in mind, before moving on to close readings in the main body of this thesis, I will first consider some important dimensions in representations of the child figure in colonial South African history and literary culture.

### **The Child in Colonial Discourse and its Variant in Colonial and Apartheid South Africa**

Jan Smuts, former Prime Minister (1919 to 1924) of the Union of South Africa and one of the earliest exponents of the policy of racial segregation, in his Rhodes Memorial Lecture at Oxford in 1929, sketched out his view on differential development or segregation as the political solution to South Africa's 'native problem'. As he informed his British audience of the reasons and imperatives behind a segregationist policy in South Africa, he first gave a description of 'the African' (in this Introduction I am using this formulation in its historical context) as a 'distinct human type'.

This type has some wonderful characteristics. It has largely remained a child type, with a child psychology and outlook. A child-like human cannot be a bad human, for are we not in spiritual matters bidden to be like unto little children? Perhaps as a direct result of this temperament the African is the only happy human I have come across.<sup>7</sup>

This racist description of 'the African' through the metaphor of the child, which has also been widely extrapolated to representations of the African continent as a whole, is deeply rooted in Western philosophical traditions and in colonial discourse. One of the foundational examples might be Hegel, when in *Lectures on The Philosophy of History* (1837) he excluded Africa from his philosophical

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<sup>7</sup> Jan Christiaan Smuts, *Africa and Some World Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 74-5. Mahmood Mamdani gives a detailed analysis of the policy of 'institutional segregation' Smuts proposes in this lecture. He also points out the significance of the childhood trope in Smuts's rhetoric. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 3-8.

map of world history. The rationale for this exclusion was that, as Hegel put it, 'Africa proper [...] is the Gold-land compressed within itself—the land of childhood, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night'.<sup>8</sup> Both Hegel's and Smuts's formulations derived from a common historical context dating back to Enlightenment thought, where the invention of a romanticist notion of the child was coterminous with the discursive consolidation of the relationship between the imperial centre and its non-European and colonial other.<sup>9</sup> Jo Ann Wallace suggests that it is the invention of the child that makes thinkable nineteenth-century English colonialist imperialism because of the conceptual cross-fertilization between the idea of the child and notions of race and primitivism.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Bill Ashcroft points out that the trope of the child is particularly important to imperial discourse, because the idea of innocence and the image of the innocent child are able to naturalize and therefore mask the racist and hierarchical relations in the discursive formation of the Empire and its colonial other.<sup>11</sup> Such masking of a colonialist power structure is particularly fixated upon the rhetoric of a filial and patriarchal relationship and most often through the issue of education. 'The child is primitive, pre-literate, educable, formed and forming in the image of the parent', as Ashcroft perceptively puts it, 'there are no colonies which are primitive without being childlike in their amenability to instruction; there are no colonies which are sons and daughters of empire without being marginal, negated and debased to some extent'.<sup>12</sup>

While Smuts's use of the trope of the child bore close association with this broad historical context of European colonial imperialism, it was also embroiled

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<sup>8</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Ariès's influential, though much debated, book *Centuries of Childhood* argues that the idea of childhood did not exist in medieval society, and that it only gradually came into being in the seventeenth century as a modern invention. See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962).

<sup>10</sup> Jo-Ann Wallace, 'Describing the Water-babies: "the Child" in Post-colonial Theory', in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality*, ed. by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 171-84 (p. 171).

<sup>11</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *On Post-colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

in the complex political, religious, and ideological debates specifically regarding South Africa's racial discourse and policies.<sup>13</sup> While it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to sketch even briefly the genesis of these debates that led to the formal implementation of the system called 'apartheid' with the National Party's accession to power in 1948, I want to point out that the legacy of a romanticist and colonialist notion of the child was a common rhetorical device in the formation of racial discourse in South Africa. Despite the different and even competing ideologies and policies supporting white domination, varying from Smuts's brand of segregation explicated in a paternalistic guise to the more coercive and brutal form of segregation implemented by the apartheid government, justifications for racial segregation and the masking of white supremacist intentions were frequently intertwined with the trope of the child and the naturalized power relationship between parents/teachers and children. This reciprocal metaphor of 'the African' and the child was reflected in everyday language where the African male, regardless of age, was generally referred to as 'boy'—mine boy, houseboy, delivery boy.<sup>14</sup>

The metaphorical significance of the child in the formation of South African racial discourse had direct influence on the discursive as well as institutional changes regarding the education of black children. Before apartheid, almost all schools for black children were established by religious organizations. Richard Elphick, in his historical study of the role of missionaries in South African racial politics, points out that the missionaries' participation in the formation of a racial discourse has evolved around the tension between Christian egalitarian aspirations for equality and the drive to maintain white supremacy since the rise of segregationist thought in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Despite its

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<sup>13</sup> For historical studies regarding debates about segregationist policies before apartheid, see, for example, Saul Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), and Paul Maylam, *South Africa's Racial Past: The History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation, and Apartheid* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> 'boy, n.1 and int.', in *OED Online*

<<http://0-www.oed.com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/Entry/22323>> [accessed 14 August 2017].

<sup>15</sup> Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012). For his discussion of education in particular, see pp. 181-201.

inextricable association with paternalism, that implicit possibility for racial equality through the education of black children in mission schools was completely eliminated by the apartheid government when it closed down most of these schools after the enactment of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. By separating black children's access to educational institutions and facilities from white children's, the Bantu education system was aiming at ensuring that black population was solely directed towards the manual labour market. As Hendrik Verwoerd, the Minister of Native Affairs at that time, explained in his speech,

There is no place for him (the African) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. [...] Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze. [...] What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?<sup>16</sup>

Verwoerd's speech conformed to a developmental logic buttressed by its colonialist assumptions. For white children's development into adulthood, education was the necessary route to maturity, to reason, to civilization, and to culture. Justified by the rhetoric of geographical separation in Verwoerd's choice of terminology, 'the European' and 'the African', separate education for black children, nevertheless, indicated not so much separate development as no development for them at all, so that they could remain childlike under the perpetual control of white authorities.

### **The Children of Empire and White Boyhood in Colonial Literary Culture**

The special affinity between the child and imperial discourse had its manifestation in literary productions in the colonial period. It was not a

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<sup>16</sup> Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, *Bantu Education: Policy for the immediate Future—Statement by the Hon. Dr H. F. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, in the Senate of the Parliament of the Union of South Africa, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1954* (Pretoria: Information Service of the Department of Native Affairs, 1954).



coincidence that the peak of British colonization around the turn of the twentieth century also bore witness to the so-called 'Golden Age of Children's Literature'. It was as if, while the Empire was pouring its economic and bureaucratic power into the exploitation and control of its colonies overseas, it simultaneously projected its cultural and imaginative output produced from within onto a cult of childhood, resulting in a surge of literary works about children and for children in the name of education and development. A particular literary genre that constellates these broad ideological underpinnings is the imperial romance, in which Africa is most often cast in the popular form of boyhood adventure stories. One of the most famous examples of this form is Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). Dedicated to 'all the big and little boys who read it', the novel's intended child readers—the 'boys' it speaks to, whether they are adults or children—are in fact constructed by the text itself. It is for the imagined child reader that the novel is able to present its glorified model of masculinity and male adulthood epitomized in the exploration and conquest of a feminized and sexualized Africa.<sup>17</sup> South Africa is inscribed in these adventure tales written from the imperial centre, therefore, as a space for the child and of the child. It is where white adults reconnect with their childhood, and it is also where the white boy undergoes his rite of passage—they become subjects and citizens of the Empire by exploring and acting out upon the 'virgin land' of the colonial space.<sup>18</sup>

South African literature in English by white writers in the colonial period bears its direct lineage from European literary traditions, especially in terms of the romanticist legacy of the innocent child as the embodiment of colonial Africa. Nevertheless, writing from outside the centre of the metropole, literary elements that complicate the conventions of imperial inscriptions of the colonial

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<sup>17</sup> For a study of the formation of boyhood, masculinity, and the empire in this genre, see Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), and his specific analysis of Haggard in pp. 127-53.

<sup>18</sup> Elwyn Jenkins's scholarship focuses on children's literature about/in South Africa, see Elwyn Jenkins, *South Africa in English-language Children's Literature, 1814-1912* (Jefferson, N.C.; London: McFarland, 2002), *National Character in South African English Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2006), and *Seedlings: English Children's Reading & Writers in South Africa* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2012).

space are also fully present.<sup>19</sup> One example of a modernist literary subversion of the imperial romance and its evocation of the child is Olive Schreiner's classic *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which I will discuss in more detail later through J. M. Coetzee's work in Chapter 4.

Increasing racial conflicts and the establishment of the apartheid state with the National Party's accession to power also bore witness to growing incongruity between literary forms of a European genealogy and South Africa's local specific historical realities. Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), which became an instant international best-seller after its publication at the inception of the apartheid state, was also, as Schreiner's work, a rewriting of the discursive construction of South Africa as a romanticised colonial space for/about white boyhood. However, re-enacting certain tropes and patterns in colonial literary discourse about racial relations, including its evocation of the child and innocence, the novel was also subject to much criticism from within South African literary culture and stood as a significant case that triggered debates about the ideological underpinnings of literary forms in terms of their amenability to accommodate experiences, especially of different races, in apartheid South Africa (I will also discuss this in detail in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2).

### **The Destruction of Innocence and the Brutalized Black Child**

Besides the evocation and subversion of the innocent child derived from imperial discourse and Western literary traditions, which stand for the hopes and ideals of white supremacist society, South African literature abounds in another prevalent image of the child, which is very much bound up with its local and historical realities. As I have pointed out earlier in reference to Jonker's

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<sup>19</sup> For analyses of the elements of resistance in the genre of imperial romance set in South Africa, see Laura Chrisman, *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

poem, this image is of brutalized children—the violent destruction of innocence—as a symbol for political resistance and anti-apartheid struggle. In an article entitled ‘Recovering Childhood: Children in the South African National Reconstruction’ (1995), Njabulo Ndebele traces this compelling metaphor of cruelties against the child in South Africa’s literary representation and public imaginary, particularly in the history of black writing. A precursory example Ndebele offers is the Basotho Sesotho writer Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka: The King of the Zulus* (1925). The novel tells the story of Chaka, an illegitimate child who has been ill treated from birth, flees from his people, and then returns to build one of the most powerful kingdoms in Africa, but only as a means to seek vengeance from his people. Regarding such a narrative pattern in which a child victim grows up to inflict disorder and destruction upon an unjust society, Ndebele observes that ‘the images of the travails of children are powerful metaphors of indictment, calling for the urgent redemption of society’.<sup>20</sup> Following this motif in the mythical story of the Zulu kingdom, Ndebele then analyses the ‘archetypal’ image of the suffering child as social criticism in literary discourse during the anti-apartheid struggle. The work he mentions include short stories published in *Drum* magazine by Es’kia Mphahlele and Arthur Maimane, a poem by Oswald Mtshali, and the novel *The Children of Soweto* (1982) by Mbulelo Mzamane.

Ndebele’s critical attitude towards this prevalent motif partly follows his polemic in an earlier influential essay ‘The Rediscovery of the Ordinary’ (1986), in which he denounced the spectacular exhibition of violence in the form of ‘protest literature’ in black writing.<sup>21</sup> Extrapolating this critique to the theme of children in particular, in ‘Recovering Childhood’ Ndebele seems to be suggesting that metaphors of the child’s suffering, whether it is of the child victim or the child as active participant in the violent political scene, has also been complicit

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<sup>20</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, ‘Recovering Childhood: Children in South African National Reconstruction’, in *Children and the Politics of Culture*, ed. by Sharon Stephens (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 321-33 (p. 322).

<sup>21</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, ‘Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa’, *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, 2(1986), 143-57.

in the spectacular discourse of opposition and indictment, which already ceases to have any real constructive effects in post-apartheid nation building. Facing such a problem, Ndebele points out that 'the recovery of childhood is something inextricably bound with the reconstruction of society' and proposes 'the recovery of childhood and innocence as a metaphor for the restoration of freedom and the range of human values that should go with it'.<sup>22</sup> This proposition is, on the one hand, of high relevance to real children, whose lives need to be continually rescued and improved through political, economic, and educational changes in post-apartheid society. On the other hand, it is, in a discursive and imaginative dimension, associated with redefinitions of childhood and changing representations of children that will contribute to the reconstruction of national historiography, which is also what this thesis in part aims to do.

While I do agree with Ndebele's contention that childhood needs to be rediscovered for the sake of social change, I take issue with the idea of recovering 'innocence'. Not only is the notion of innocence a problematic European invention in colonial discourse, the essentialist underpinning of this notion is also clear in various forms of power relations in different ideological and political contexts.<sup>23</sup> This thesis will discuss in due course the ways in which narrative representations of the child in selected South African writing in fact resist the notion of innocence in a variety of discursive contexts. These include the imagery of the innocent child in Western pastoral tradition (Chapter 4), the romanticist celebration of Africa as the innocent child in anti-colonial African diasporic thinking (Chapter 1), and the legal notions of exculpation and innocence derived from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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<sup>22</sup> Ndebele, 'Recovering Childhood', p. 332.

<sup>23</sup> Besides postcolonial criticism, there are studies in other areas of oppositional critical theory that critique the politics of innocence but mostly in the Anglo-American world. I'm listing two widely influential examples here. Jacqueline Rose, in her study of the production and dissemination of *Peter Pan*, points out that the notion of innocence and the category of 'children's literature' are adults' invention to mask their own anxiety about sexuality. See Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984). Lee Edelman bases his famous proposition of queer negativity upon the observation that the pervasive image of the innocent child in American popular culture functions as a way of excluding the queer subject from the heteronormative social and political order. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

(Chapter 3). In a more constructive light of critique, I would argue that, to appropriate Ndebele's terms, to engage in the recovery of childhood in national reconstruction is to develop a concept of 'recovery' or 'rediscovery' itself—to narrate relationships amongst the past, the present, and the future and to negotiate dialectics of national belonging and transnational/global connection as a constant process of recovery and rediscovery, which will engender a perpetual potentiality for change.<sup>24</sup>

Another point I would like to add to Ndebele's useful proposition here is that such renewed and shifting representations of the child is not particular to the immediate post-apartheid moment. It has always been present in South African literary discourse, across a diversity of writing through the apartheid era to the present. I am not suggesting that 'apartheid', as a historical span from the National Party's accession to power in 1948 to the first multiracial democratic election in 1994, is a marker to periodise South African literature. My critical angle in approaching 'apartheid' in writings during and beyond this historical period—especially in my use of the word 'apartheid' in the title of this thesis itself—is to see it as a dominant discursive sign in South Africa's national historiography, a sign that is not only coined by the official discourse of the state but has also been constructed by various modes of writing from within and beyond national borders.

Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, in a 1986 article, raised a polemic against Derrida's discussion of apartheid in 'Racism's Last Word' as severing the word from the specific historical and political contexts from which it arose.<sup>25</sup> Their attack, nevertheless, was not so much against Derrida alone as against the pervasive analytic models, particularly poststructuralism, in the Western academic world at that time, that had created all kinds of obliteration, distortion,

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<sup>24</sup> Childhood studies have posited similar conceptualization of the child. Claudia Castañeda argues, for example, that the child is 'a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being: an entity in the making'. See Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, 'No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme"', *Critical Inquiry*, 13(1986), 140-54.

generalisation, and stereotypes that obstructed knowledge production about the non-Western world. This was also when ‘postcolonial studies’ began to emerge as a thriving critical discipline. Looking back, however, Derrida’s invocation of apartheid is a precise example of the ways in which apartheid as a significant national situation in global politics is able to generate debates from varieties of locations and intellectual currents, both in Western and non-Western contexts.<sup>26</sup> A significant thread running through this thesis, therefore, is to trace those responses and debates in the narrative structures, genres, and forms in South African literature, while placing them in the specific historical conditions and local discourses that have given rise to their subject matters and content. Participating in the changing construction and deconstruction of ‘apartheid’ in the nation’s historical narrative both within the vicissitudes of the anti-apartheid struggle and beyond, the selected South African writers discussed in this study all show an acute awareness of the linguistic/textual medium and literary forms they are adopting to express their opposition to the apartheid state—and similar constructs of inequality. It is by carefully mobilizing their voices as discursive critique that ‘apartheid’ is incorporated and contested in these writers’ thinking and writing.

### **The Child, the Body, Language, and Modes of Critique**

Edward Said, in the conclusion to his 1975 book *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, summarizes his study on the subject of ‘beginning’ through Vico’s

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<sup>26</sup> Transnational connections in South African literature have been a significant topic in recent academic research. For an early study of the transnational imaginaries between South Africa and American popular culture, see Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For studies of South African literature in Cold War politics and comparative perspective on South African and Eastern European literary culture, see Monica Popescu, *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *South African Literature’s Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). For comparative studies between South Africa and India as well as South African writing and African American activism, see *South Africa & India: Shaping the Global South*, ed. by Isabel Hofmeyr and Michelle Williams (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), Stéphane Robolin, *Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-era African American and South African Writing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

philosophical ideas and the Vico-Descartes opposition. Said observes,

Unlike Descartes, Vico believed that the human mind had 'an indefinite nature' (*l'indiffinita natura della mente umane*). Clear and distinct ideas are the last rather than the first things to be thought, for before he becomes a philosopher, a man, like all men without exception, begins his life as a child who in time sheds his childish beliefs and acquires the less imaginative, less poetic ideas commonly known as clear, distinct, and mature ones. Historically, therefore, the first instances of human thought are obscure images; only at a relatively late stage of historical development do men have the power to think in clear abstractions, just as according to 'the universal principle of etymology in all languages, . . . words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit'. [...] For according to Vico, in becoming more definite, more accurate, more scientific, the human mind in time became less grounded in the body, more abstract, less able directly to grasp its own essential self, less capable of beginning at the beginning, less capable of defining itself. [...] Just as children have indefinite ideas about philosophy, so too do philosophers have indefinite, or at least inappropriate, ideas about the childhood of institutions.<sup>27</sup>

By placing the narrative development of individual life from childhood to adulthood in parallel with the passage of human history, Said, through Vico, attaches primary importance to the 'imaginative' and 'poetic' qualities of 'childish beliefs' as the foundation of all clear, distinct, definite, accurate, scientific, and mature faculties of the adult. To illustrate Vico's far-reaching importance for the modern reader, Said praises his inversion of the Cartesian mind/body binary and also his evocation of language as of primary significance in the study of the human mind and history.

I am drawing attention to this passage here because there are two significant conceptual aspects in Said's interpretation of Vico in terms of the evocation of childhood that resonate with my reading of the child in South African literature that follows. Firstly, the recuperation of the child stages the dynamic between language and the body. Evoking the Cartesian mind/body

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<sup>27</sup> Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp.347-48.

binary, Said points out that ‘words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit’. In Said’s critical practice, however, it is desirable to subvert the dictates of the mind over the body. Only by returning to ‘the childhood of institutions’ and recuperating the ‘illogic’ of the senses of the human body is the critic able to examine the logical, developed institutions of the adult’s mind and language. The critical energies derived from this interlocked trope of the child and the body are to be found particularly in the paradoxes, liminalities, and ambiguities in literary discourse, as what Said calls the ‘sympathetic imagination’.<sup>28</sup> In the selected literary works in this thesis, the South African writers under discussion all use the trope of childhood to narrate the tension between language and the experiential body in order to explore and to engage in modes of critique against varieties of ideologies and discourses.

The second aspect of inquiry I want to evoke via Said, which is also related to the first, is about self-referentiality and self-reflexivity. To incorporate the poetic, imaginative dimensions of the body and of childhood in the interrogation of epistemological systems that adults’ abstract logic espouses, what is called for is a self-reflexive critique that constantly puts to question the medium of critical language that the adult writer/critic is always using. This is also true of South African writers’ critical perspectives in their novelistic discourse. The texts that I have chosen all in one way or another engage with self-reflexive critique of literary forms and modes of rhetoric that the writers themselves are adopting to imagine new forms of subjectivity outside the narrative of political opposition and liberation. Exploring these questions, each chapter will use a conceptual formulation to illustrate the ways in which imaginings of the child are part and parcel of these new forms of subjectivity constructed in self-reflexivity: ‘entangled temporality’ in Chapter 1, ‘metamorphosis’ in Chapter 2, ‘irony’ in Chapter 3, and ‘political nonposition’ in Chapter 4.

Chapter 1 revisits two autobiographies by *Drum* writers, Es’kia Mphahlele’s

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 349.



*Down Second Avenue* (1959) and Bloke Modisane's *Blame me on History* (1961). Focusing on the issue of temporality, my analysis of these texts seeks to revise a conventional reading of them as 'protest literature'. Recognizing that the works under discussion were produced from the writers' polemical political positions and from inside the historical juncture of anti-apartheid and anti-colonial resistance in and beyond South Africa, I will argue that themes and motifs derived from the rhetoric of protest and resistance are, nonetheless, closely associated with the reinvention of the black subject as time. Highlighting the insufficiencies and instabilities of childhood memory and the fragmentary representation of childhood experience in these autobiographies, my reading explores the ways in which both authors offer narrative reflections on their own historical present by juxtaposing narratives of a recurring childhood of the past and a constant orientation towards a diasporic future. Mapping Jacob Dlamini's 2009 autobiography *Native Nostalgia* onto the two works under discussion, I also wish to illuminate new patterns of reading that may contribute to our understanding of a post-apartheid present through narratives produced from within moments of anti-apartheid resistance.

In Chapter 2, I use Nadine Gordimer as a significant figure in South Africa's culture of letters, one whose writing epitomizes the formal innovations of high modernism on the one hand and engages immediately in the major intellectual debates and changing socio-political situations in South Africa's cultural politics during apartheid on the other. While Chapter 1 has historically located black writing in the 1950s in terms of the writers' responses both to apartheid's official discourse and to liberalism, Chapter 2 starts with examining responses from a white writer in this period in Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days* (1953). Compared with the more radical formal innovations in later stages of her writing career, this debut semi-autobiographical novel complies more with a conventional European *Bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, its representation of childhood encapsulates Gordimer's initial self-reflexive critique of literary forms and her scepticism of the ideological underpinnings of liberalism and the

liberal novel. Such a critical perspective, derived from the child figure, reappears in her later work, bearing witness to her more radical critique of political liberalism in South Africa in *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), her novelistic incorporation and appropriation of radical politics and Marxist thought in *Burger's Daughter* (1979), and her dystopian envisioning of a post-apartheid future in *July's People* (1981). Besides her novels and short stories, the child is also a recurring trope in Gordimer's critical essays in a developing critical discourse about black writing and national literature. While Gordimer's thinking and writing have always shown direct engagements with South African politics, in this chapter my analysis also draws attention to the way in which transnational crossings have substantially inform her creative and critical output.

The sense of ambiguity embedded in Gordimer's famous appropriation of Antonio Gramsci's phrase 'interregnum' to the South African situation in a 1982 speech becomes a prominent feature of writings in the late-apartheid period and the transitional decade. Chapter 3 seeks to reveal the politics and literary representations of ambiguity in confessional narratives in the transitional period through works by two male Afrikaner authors, Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1993) and Michiel Heyns's *Children's Day* (2002). Drawing on Mark Sanders's and Linda Hutcheon's theorisations of irony, I argue that the child, positioned neither fully inside nor outside language, serves as an enabling literary trope to reimagine whiteness through ironizing the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism and white supremacy. Hinging on the tension between speaking and silence, the child figure in writings of this period also envisages a form of subjectivity and political participation through the narrative gesture of withdrawal.

Chapter 4 focuses on J. M. Coetzee's fictional memoir *Boyhood* (1997) and his recent novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), and locates Coetzee's ideological critique of colonialist and neocolonialist forms of power in the figuration of the child. Following analysis of confessional writing in the transition in the previous

chapter, this chapter first examines Coetzee's novelistic critique of the discourse of confession itself as well as the generic convention of autobiography through his representation of the child's narrative voice and the child's body in *Boyhood*. I then move to Coetzee's growing concern in his late and post-apartheid writing, both fictional and critical, with the concept of 'political nonposition', which is very often elucidated through the child figure. Alongside this concept, I will read *The Childhood of Jesus* in relation to Coetzee's long-held complex relationship with South African politics. While the novel was written after Coetzee's emigration to Australia, it is a story, as intended by the author himself, about no place with no history. I have included this work as a way to offer some summative remarks about some important issues I have discussed throughout this thesis. Echoing my analysis of the child in Jonker's poem, which presents the nexus between the local and the universal in a movement from a specific historical and national moment to what's beyond, the child figure in *The Childhood of Jesus* and in Coetzee's work embodies this nexus in a movement from no place and no history back to the South African situation.

## Chapter 1

### Entangled Temporality, the Child, and the Black Subject: *Drum Writers Revisited*

In the first few pages of Es'kia Mphahlele's autobiography *Down Second Avenue* (1959), the author recollects his childhood spent in the rural village of Maupaneng with his grandmother, before he moved to Second Avenue in Marabastad, the township near Pretoria, to live with his parents, at the age of thirteen. His childhood in Maupaneng has been largely an uneventful period, according to Mphahlele's account, but the retrospective narrative voice of the adult author summarizes it with strangely complex sentiments.

Looking back to those first thirteen years of my life—as much of it as I can remember—I cannot help thinking that it was time wasted. I had nobody to shape them into a definite pattern. Searching through the confused threads of that pattern a few things keep imposing themselves on my whole judgment. My grandmother; the mountain; the tropical darkness which glow worms seemed to try in vain to scatter; long black tropical snakes; the Leshoana river carrying on its broad back trees, cattle, boulders; world of torrential rains; the solid shimmering heat beating down on yearning earth; the romantic picture of a woman with a child on her back and an earthen pot on her head, silhouetted against the mirage. But all in all perhaps I led a life shared by all other country boys. Boys who are aware of only one purpose of living; to be.<sup>1</sup>

Written at the moment when the writer has just embarked on an exile that would last for twenty years, the passage here expresses a strong impulse to

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<sup>1</sup> Es'kia Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 8. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

build a meaningful attachment to his past and the country he was just forced to leave—to find the one purpose of living shared by all other country boys who also share the same childhood. The existential yearning for a communal experience of belonging, however, is thwarted by his lack of a means to put such experience ‘into a definite pattern’. The negation of his childhood as ‘time wasted’ only results in a narrative consisting in an impressionistic array of disconnected and flashing images. This lack of ‘a definite pattern’ to narrate his past in a meaningful and coherent manner in fact suggests the author’s lack of any adequate literary forms at hand to incorporate his childhood experience in his narrative reinvention of the self. Besides the apparent Western colonialist and romanticist pastoral depiction of Africa often evoked in the reciprocal metaphor of the innocent child and the African landscape,<sup>2</sup> Mphahlele’s text also seems to echo his criticism of the romanticist tendency of the poetry of Négritude.<sup>3</sup> In spite of affirming Négritude as being ‘a protest and a positive assertion of African values’, Mphahlele is highly critical of its aesthetic practice because, as he puts it, ‘too much of the poetry inspired by it romanticizes Africa—as a symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness’.<sup>4</sup>

Such romanticism consolidated in the rhetoric of innocence that Mphahlele rejects in his recollection of childhood in the countryside is suggestive of its dialogue with another significant literary pattern in South African writing: the narrative of black experience in the process of urban modernity, particularly represented in the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ story.<sup>5</sup> The type of fiction based on such a plot usually traces a black protagonist’s journey from the country to the city. Rita Barnard points out that the movement towards modernity in such a plot ‘never really becomes a movement toward maturity; the African city never

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<sup>2</sup> See J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). I will also discuss this in detail in chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> The child is a crucial, if not the central, trope in Négritude. See Cheikh Thiam, *Return to the Kingdom of Childhood: Re-visioning the Legacy and Philosophical Relevance of Négritude* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014). Another famous example in African literature that romanticizes Africa in the trope of childhood is Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* (1954).

<sup>4</sup> Es’kia Mphahlele, ‘On Négritude in Literature’, *The Rand Daily Mail, Johannesburg*, June 7 1968.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the major works adopting this pattern, see Stephen Gray, ‘Third World Meets First World: The Theme of “Jim Comes to Joburg” in South African English Fiction’, *Kunapipi*, 7(1985), 61-80.

becomes a site of emancipation' because 'the sociopolitical conditions for closure that pertain in the affirmative *Bildungsroman* were lacking'.<sup>6</sup> The black subject is never granted full citizenship in apartheid's 'racist centralized bureaucracy' executed in the cities.<sup>7</sup> The urban migrant figures remain, therefore, in a quotation from Mahmood Mamdani employed by Barnard, 'a class *in* civil society, but not *of* civil society'.<sup>8</sup> While this type of story hardly allows its protagonists to acquire their *Bildung* in the city, the endings of such stories are usually projected back onto the country, onto a lost innocence that has been corrupted by city life. In one of the most famous variants of such a story, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), novelistic closure hinging on liberal conscience and a Christian moral of redemption is cloaked in the plot of a father from the countryside searching for his lost son in the city, which is also a journey to seek and eventually affirm the lost innocence of the child.

For Mphahlele and his fellow writers who have been associated with *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, that the black subject was denied full citizenship within the urban space, which was implied in the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' story, was clearly incongruous with their own perception of city life and, for better or for worse, the full embrace of the new 'multiculturalism' of urban experience in their writing. This generation of young black writers was creating for themselves, through their effervescent literary expression, a modern subjectivity that resisted the tribal, inferior, 'childlike', and premodern personhood ascribed to them not only by apartheid's racist ideology but also by the ethos of the paternalistic liberal trusteeship that Paton's novel epitomized.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rita Barnard, 'Tsotsis: On Law, the Outlaw, and the Postcolonial State', *Contemporary Literature*, 49(2008), 541-72 (p. 547).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 547.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 547, quoting Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Rob Nixon points out that *Cry, the Beloved Country* emerges as 'a cardinal counter-text' against which the *Drum* writers create their own literary identity. See Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), p. 26. Andrew van der Vlies, in his book history study of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, also suggests that the book's reception within South Africa and its early serialized publication in *Drum*, which was then called *The African Drum*, show how its inherent political programme of white liberal trusteeship was in fact 'received sceptically by a sophisticated, politicised, urban, black readership'. See Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 88.

The logic to be extracted from such discursive subversion is about temporality too. The ideological underpinning of the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' story is secured by its linear temporality—a narrative template that constructs the subject in a sequential process of moving from the country to the city, from childhood to adulthood, and from innocence to the loss of such innocence (if not the establishment of a mature sociopolitical identity). It is the type of temporal sequence that Mphahlele repudiates in his autobiographical narrative. In his account of childhood in the passage quoted above, the past is evoked in the ambivalent double gesture of affirmation and rejection. The past's smooth progression into the present—the transition from the child to the adult—is interrupted by disjointed and fragmentary descriptions of images and sensory impressions. Such a subversion of linear temporality is constantly enacted structurally and stylistically in the autobiographical writings of the *Drum* writers. In this chapter, I will be looking at two significant works from this period: Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* (1963). My reading seeks to understand the ways in which the representation of time in these works—the reconfiguration of the past, the present, and the future through childhood and memory—partakes of the refashioning of the black subject, a significant move of literary intervention that still has profound resonance in our post-apartheid present.

Achille Mbembe, in 'African Modes of Self-Writing', analyses two problematic modes of historicist thinking in defining the African subject. One is *Afro-radicalism*, which relies on the rhetoric of 'autonomy, resistance, and emancipation [...] as the sole criterion for determining the legitimacy of an authentic African discourse'.<sup>10</sup> The other is the tendency of *nativism*, which 'promoted the idea of a unique African identity founded on membership of the black race'.<sup>11</sup> Writing against these two dominant intellectual currents in defining African identity, Mbembe proposes that one way to step out of such a

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<sup>10</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', trans. by Steven Rendall, *Public Culture*, 14(2002), 239-73 (pp. 240-41).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

theoretical quandary would be 'to reconceptualise the notion of time in relation to memory and subjectivity'.<sup>12</sup> His own reconceptualisation of time, which is elaborated in *On the Postcolony* (2001), is to understand the African subject through the 'time of entanglement', which may also be called 'emerging time' and 'time of existence and experience'.<sup>13</sup> Such entangled time of African existence, according to Mbembe's definition, is 'neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within society'. It is 'made up of disturbances, of a bundle of unforeseen events, of more or less regular fluctuations and oscillations', and its 'real pattern of ebbs and flows shows that this time is not irreversible'.<sup>14</sup>

Mbembe's proposition to understand the African subject as time provides a useful conceptual framework for me to revisit the *Drum* writers and their autobiographies as exiles around the early 1960s. In these writers' narratives of the self, both tendencies of *nativism* and *Afro-radicalism* are complicated and contested by the representation of time. Firstly, such time of entanglement, manifested in the entanglement of childhood and adulthood, calls into question the essentialist notion of one's relationship with tradition and with the past. Secondly, motifs that have usually been associated with political emancipation and protest, such as the rhetoric of urgency, exile, and violence, all contribute to a critique of linear temporality and teleological historiography. My specific analysis that follows thus seeks to unravel the ways in which narratives of childhood memory and the entangled temporality they entail enabled this generation of black writers to negotiate their position in that historical juncture of intensifying anti-apartheid resistance, and to create new forms of subjectivity in relation to the two significant processes they were undergoing: urban modernity on the one hand, and African diaspora on the other.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>13</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 16.



## **The 'Fabulous Decade' and *Drum* Magazine: Literary Innovations From Short Stories to Autobiographies**

The 1950s witnessed the introduction of many acts of legislation that consolidated the power of the apartheid regime. The Group Areas Act of 1950, for instance, assigned different residential and business areas to designated racial groups. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 formally banned the Communist Party of South Africa, while its peculiarly broad definition of the term 'communism' allowed the government to suppress any activities that were considered radical and threatening to the apartheid regime. The Population Registration Act of 1950 required the classification and registration by race of all South Africans on birth, which became the basis for an entire legal system of racial division. More importantly, as Saul Dubow puts it, the principles of this act 'became internalized by the vast majority of South Africans'.<sup>15</sup> As in many aspects of apartheid, 'popular racism worked alongside bureaucratic and legal formulations, each level supporting and reinforcing the other'.<sup>16</sup>

Intensifying political oppression consequently unleashed a burgeoning wave of resistance movements led by the ANC and other protest organizations. It also generated wide-ranging global responses, as the retrogressive political situation of Apartheid South Africa had become a crucial international problem in post-war global politics.<sup>17</sup> Alongside such fermenting political struggle, this decade also saw a burst of cultural production by urban black artists and writers, best exemplified by the vibrant cultural scene in Sophiatown, a suburb in Johannesburg. Rob Nixon describes Sophiatown as 'a shorthand for 50s cultural brio—for the journalists and fiction writers, the shebeen queens

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<sup>15</sup> Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> For specific historical details about political resistance from the rule of Malan to Verwoerd, see Dubow, *Apartheid*, pp. 38-73.

presiding over speakeasies, and the jazz artists and gangsters who revered style'.<sup>18</sup> Lewis Nkosi, one of the most influential *Drum* writers, recalls this period as 'the fabulous decade' because of this sudden yet short flourishing of cultural expression against the backdrop of a grim political situation.<sup>19</sup> With the forced removal of Sophiatown in 1955 as a result of the execution of the Group Areas Act, many important participants in this cultural scene were driven into exile under the accusation of 'communist' tendencies. This short 'renaissance'—a term that has often been adopted to describe this period—thus gradually went into dissolution. Despite its failure to stand against the exacerbating effects of apartheid, Sophiatown Renaissance gave birth to some of the most significant figures in South African literary and cultural history, some of whom later rose to international fame—jazz artists like Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, and Abdullah Ibrahim, and a group of black writers whose major contributions in that period were to the iconic *Drum* magazine. Besides Mphahlele and Nkosi, whose influence extended far beyond *Drum*, the 'fabulous decade' also witnessed a literary flourishing by many active journalists and fiction writers like Henry Nxumalo, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi, and Todd Matshikiza.

Founded in 1951 by Jim Bailey, a business tycoon's son, *Drum* first appeared in Cape Town as a monthly magazine under the title *The African Drum*. After moving to Johannesburg the following year, it became a thoroughly urban production aiming at black readers living in the townships—'an entertainment-exposé-picture periodical crammed with fiction and muckraking, busty broads and huckster advertising'.<sup>20</sup> Although the magazine served more commercial than political purposes, its wide circulation and its content indicated close affiliation with a rising urban consumer culture and thereby with modernity that were in active opposition to apartheid's repressive

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<sup>18</sup> Nixon, *Homelands*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), p.3.

<sup>20</sup> Graeme Addison, 'Drum Beat; An Examination of Drum', *Speak*, 1(1978), 5-6.

ideology and its accelerating brutal legislations.<sup>21</sup> After the Sophiatown removal and under the increasing pressure of government censorship, *Drum* completely removed its literary and political content and turned into a pictorial from the 1960s. It was only the *Drum* of the 1950s, therefore, that was noted in the history of black writing. Its enduring significance, nevertheless, lay not so much in its literary publications themselves (mostly short stories and serialized longer fictions) as in an emerging critical discourse about the aesthetics and politics of black writing arising from them. While literary creations in *Drum* were deplored retrospectively by their own writers as ‘escapist’,<sup>22</sup> critical debates revolving around the merits and drawbacks of these publications substantially influenced the *Drum* writers’ longer narrative prose works during their exile and kept generating new inspiration for later generations of black writers.

Prior to the *Drum* decade, Peter Abrahams—another significant exiled writer who left South Africa early in 1939—published his collection of short stories *Dark Testament* (1942). Mphahlele, who claimed to have been influenced by Abrahams’s literary depictions of the townships, published *Man Must Live and Other Stories* in 1947. But it was only in *Drum* that a more unified literary aesthetic combining journalistic realism with the rhythmic and sensational jolts and bolts of jazz music began to emerge. Between 1951 and 1958, *Drum* published over ninety short stories, which was the chief literary form of its publications. These short stories covered a tremendously wide variety of subjects ranging from marriage, love, and death in everyday lives, street gangster thrillers and shebeen culture, to pass laws and prison violence. The multifarious aspects of urban black life were fashioned into these short

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<sup>21</sup> For more detailed studies of *Drum*, see, for example, Michael Chapman, ‘More than Telling a Story: *Drum* and its Significance in Black South African Writing’, in *The ‘Drum’ Decade: Stories from the 1950s*, ed. by Michael Chapman (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1989), pp. 183-232, R. Neville Choonoo, ‘The Sophiatown Generation: Black Literary Journalism during the 1950s’, in *South Africa’s Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1983*, ed. by Les Switzer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 252-65, and Dorothy Driver, ‘The Fabulous Fifties: Short Fiction in English’, in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. by David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.387-409.

<sup>22</sup> See Nkosi, *Home*, p.10, and Bloke Modisane, *Blame me on History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 159. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

narratives of intense and lively drama, presented in an identifiable style described by Nkosi as 'alive, go-getting, full of nervous energy, very wry, ironic',<sup>23</sup> and by Mphahlele, similarly, as 'racy, agitated, impressionistic... quiver[ing] with a nervous energy, a caustic wit'.<sup>24</sup>

The creation of an innovative literary style as a form of self-construction in those early years of apartheid was directly pitched against two preceding traditions in South African writing: one was published works, in English and in African languages, by the early mission-educated black elite such as Tiyo Soga, A. C. Jordan, Sol Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, and the Dhlomo Brothers; the other was, as I have mentioned earlier, the 'liberal novel' (I will discuss this broad category in more detail in the next chapter) exemplified by Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which was published exactly in the year of the National Party's accession to power in 1948. Nkosi, in his half-autobiographical, half-critical essay recollecting the *Drum* decade, reprimanded earlier generations of black writers supported by missionary presses as either 'purposefully Christian and aggressively crusading' or 'simply eccentric or unacceptably romantic' without even mentioning a single one of their names.<sup>25</sup> In a similarly strong critical tone, Nkosi also repudiated Paton's hero Stephen Kumalo, the priest who went to the city to search for his lost son and witnessed the moral decay of urban life, as 'a cunning expression of white liberal sentiment'.<sup>26</sup> As a result of this, as Nkosi put it, 'when we entered the decade of the fifties we had no literary heroes' and 'no models who could serve as moral examples for us in our private and public preoccupations'.<sup>27</sup> A crucial message in Nkosi's critique, which is common for the *Drum* writers, is that their literary identity is forged primarily in an

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<sup>23</sup> Nkosi, *Home*, p.10,

<sup>24</sup> Es'kia Mphahlele, 'Landmarks of Literary History in South Africa: A Black Perspective', in *Perspectives on South African English Literature*, ed. by Michael Chapman and others (Parklands, South Africa: Ad Donker, 1992), pp. 37-59 (p. 51).

<sup>25</sup> Nkosi, *Home*, p.4. Mphahlele has more detailed and thorough critical reviews of these mission-educated black writers. His views on them are also more complex than Nkosi's. While Mphahlele admits that these works could hardly serve as apt literary models for the rising urban black writers under apartheid, he also proposes that serious attention to them, especially those in African languages, should be restored. See Mphahlele, 'Landmarks'.

<sup>26</sup> Nkosi, *Home*, p.5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

oppositional stance against literary traditions derived from the missionary notion of Christianity as well as the paternalistic liberal conscience permeating white writing in their time. Another feature of Nkosi's criticism worth emphasising, which is crucial to our rereading of works from the *Drum* decade for their lessons for the present, is that the polemical positions upheld in their writing are usually rendered in a style that delivers its critical acuity and political agenda through the affective power of literary tropes and figurative expressions.

While the short story was the dominant form in *Drum* publications, these writers turned their attention to autobiography and literary criticism after they went into exile. Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* was published two years after his exile to Nigeria. Todd Matshikiza's *Chocolates for my Wife* (1961) and Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* were published in England shortly after they moved there. Nkosi also started to publish his collection of autobiographical and critical essays after moving to the United States. Nevertheless, in terms of style there is never a clear distinction between autobiographical narrative and critical argumentation in their work. What we see, instead, is usually a combination of autobiographical elements and critical reflection exhibited in varieties of metaphorical and poetic expressions, whether the works are published under the rubric of 'autobiography' or 'collection of essays', such as Nkosi's *Home and Exile* (1965), or Mphahlele's *The African Image* (1962) and *Afrika My Music* (1983).

In Nkosi's critical recollection of the *Drum* decade, a significant rhetorical device used to deliver his opinion of earlier literary patterns was the trope of generational antipathy in which, identifying himself repeatedly with 'the young', he voiced an impassioned diatribe against the elders. In terms of his immediate elders who had failed to break free from white rule (from the Smuts government to Malan's apartheid), the younger generation was not prepared to

forgive their 'naive credulity' and 'incredible stupidity'.<sup>28</sup> About the most conspicuous literary embodiment of that generation of fathers, Paton's character Stephen Kumalo, Nkosi commented that Kumalo had 'all the pieties, trepidations and humilities we the young had begun to despise with such a consuming passion'.<sup>29</sup> For Nkosi, the *Drum* writers' self-invention represented a 'war between us and Stephen Kumalo', which was also 'a war between two generations—the older generation which looked forward to fruitful changes [...] and the young who saw themselves beginning their adult life under a more brutal apartheid regime'.<sup>30</sup> This trope of generational schism encapsulates an aspect of inquiry that is often subsumed under the *Drum* writers' typically overt polemical positions expressed in an emotional tone of militant fervour. To speak as the young against the old also represents an attempt to seek voice in history against the linearity of time and against the continuity amongst the past, the present, and the future. In Nkosi's essay, the discontinuity and antagonism between generations of fathers and children are suggestive of such a process of reinventing the self through the critique of a linear narrative of historical totality. It is also to be found, as I am about to show, in much more nuanced ways in other *Drum* writers' longer autobiographical narratives, in the disruption and subversion of the developmental logic buttressed by the conceptual binary between the child and the adult and by the progressive biographical transition from childhood to adulthood.

### **Temporality of Urgency**

Besides polemics against earlier black writing and the liberal novel, critical discourse springing from this proliferation of new black writing in the *Drum* decade also involves the crucial issue of the relationship between choices of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

aesthetic forms and the imperative political demands of protest and resistance under apartheid. Here is how Mphahlele described the rationale behind the impressionistic style dominating this period of literary writing, as well as the favoured form of the short story:

Impressionistic, because our writers feel life at the basic levels of sheer survival, because blacks are so close to physical pain: hunger, overcrowded public transport in which bodies chafe and push and pull; overcrowded housing, the choking smell and taste of coal smoke, the smell of garbage, of sewerage, of street litter, of wet clothes and body heat in overcrowded houses on rainy days; baton charges at political rallies, detention and solitary confinement, torture in the cells, violence between black and black. The writer attempted all the time to record minute-to-minute experience, unlike his counterpart in the former British and French colonies, who has the time and physical mobility and ease that allow him philosophical contemplation, a leisurely pace of diction. Poetry was almost entirely absent in the fifties. Narrative prose and essays became the most handy and accessible mode of expression to deal with one's own anger and sense of urgency.<sup>31</sup>

This is in fact a problematic diagnosis for the politics of black writing, which is subject to much debate from Mphahlele's contemporaries as well as later critics. One major fallacy has to do with the underlying assumption of the dictates of 'realism'—to see literature as the unmediated reflection of experience. Nkosi is the critic who perhaps most strongly opposed such adherence to realism in black writing; this, as he observed at the time, had resulted in 'journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative fiction'.<sup>32</sup> The second problematic implication in Mphahlele's discussion is the instrumentalist view of literary writing as purposefully serving a political end—to see literature as the vehicle to exhibit the experience of 'sheer survival' and 'physical pain'. Njabulo Ndebele, in his famous address 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary' in 1984, criticized the

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<sup>31</sup> Mphahlele, 'Landmarks', p. 53

<sup>32</sup> Nkosi, *Home*, p. 126. Also see Lewis Nkosi, 'Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa', in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970—1995*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), pp. 75-90.

widespread exhibitionist and dramatically demonstrative form of literary representation in the history of black South African literature. His polemic against such ‘representation of the spectacle’ included works by the *Drum* writers—whether it was the entertaining short stories published in *Drum* or the overtly ‘protest literature’ they produced in exile—as they showed the same penchant for ‘spectacular representation’ that aimed to reveal the ‘spectacular ugliness of the South African situation’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Louise Bethlehem suggested that the ‘instrumentalist concept of language’ has widely existed in ‘the overwhelmingly realist dominant of South African literary culture in English’. She argued further that such instrumentalism of literature was often masked and justified in the rhetoric of ‘urgency’ as the ‘necessary correlative and consequence of political commitment’.<sup>34</sup>

While all of the above criticisms are directed towards the ‘instrumentality’ of black writing and, for that matter, its ‘compulsory’ commitments to realism, they tend to overlook aspects of formal and stylistic innovation embedded in these works that escape the dictates of political demands and also complicate realism. In the passage I have quoted from Mphahlele, a notable feature in the style is the way in which the rhetoric combining a ‘sense of urgency’ and the immediacy of ‘minute-to-minute experience’ has contributed to a narrative representation of non-linear temporality. Mphahlele’s description of urban experience above uses a juxtaposition of sensory impressions and flickering images in an intense array of quick and short phrases. This narrative technique bears a strong resemblance to the narrative of childhood memory in the passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. ‘Urgency’ here gives rise to an experience of time in which the past and the future are folded and compressed into a present marked by an endless array of short fragments. ‘Shortness’ also seems to be a key attribute in such a rhetoric of urgency. As Modisane

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<sup>33</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, ‘Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa’, *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, 2(1986), 143-57 (p. 143).

<sup>34</sup> Louise Bethlehem, “‘A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger’: The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid”, *Poetics Today*, 22 (2001), 365-89 (p. 365).



commented on the compression of literary forms, describing the boom of short stories in this period of writing, an 'urgent, immediate, intense, concentrated form' of writing allowed for a 'short term morality'.<sup>35</sup> The rhetoric of 'urgency' and 'shortness', rather than being the necessary result of real life situations as these writers themselves seem to have suggested sometimes, have in fact set a pace for phrasing and narrative style that subverts the linearity of time and substantially complicates the aesthetic assumptions of realism.

It is no wonder that the impressionist, episodic, and fragmentary *Drum*-style representation of the 'minute-to-minute experience' of urban black life, as well as the temporalities they engender, remained in these writers' autobiographies after they had physically left South Africa. It is true that the better living conditions in exile made it possible for these writers to produce longer narrative prose works for the first time, and that the general environment of support and the greater publishing opportunities in the West gave them the chances to voice more openly their experiences under apartheid. Nevertheless, it was *Drum* and the aesthetics of urgency refracted through the form of the short story that had laid the foundation for some of their longer and more developed works.

Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*, one of the first and most widely celebrated long narrative prose works by any of the exiled *Drum* writers, represents time in a way that corresponds closely to the aesthetics of urgency developed from *Drum*. Right from the opening pages of the work, Mphahlele repeatedly adopts the narrative mode in which recollections of childhood are delivered in fragments of disconnected incidents and short episodes, which also bring to the fore the instabilities and slippages of memory.

I remember feeling quite lost during the first weeks in that little village [...] Things stand out clearly in my mind from those years. [...] I cannot remember her (grandmother) as she was those days. I remember Old Modise say at our village fire-place. [...] I still remember clearly how

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<sup>35</sup> Bloke Modisane, 'Short Story Writing in Black South Africa', *American Society of African Culture Newsletter*, 5 (March 1963), p.3.

stories were told at that fire-place. (pp. 1-6)

I can never remember Marabastad in the rainy summer months. It always comes back to me with its winters. And then I cannot remember ever feeling warm except when I was at the fire or in the sun. (p. 25)

By repeatedly reminding the reader of what he can or cannot remember, these moments show Mphahlele's clear awareness of the first-person narrator's position in the present and also make *Down Second Avenue* a highly self-reflexive text. The urge to reach for the past is constantly intertwined with an awareness of the entanglement of the past and the present. The reiteration of 'I remember' indicates that it is always the present adult narrating self that is shaping his childhood experience, also leaving gaps and creating discontinuities (he cannot remember his grandmother, nor the feeling of warmth in Marabastad).

Emphasis on the slippery nature of memory in autobiographical narratives of childhood is not unique to Mphahlele or the *Drum* writers. It is also used in Peter Abrahams' autobiography *Tell Freedom* (1954), which opens its narrative from the time of birth and Abraham's very first impressions of the world. The structure of *Tell Freedom* largely follows a linear temporal order, whereas experiences of infancy and early childhood are laid out in a series of episodic recollections that start with 'I remember'.

There are flashes of memory.  
I remember the family picnics on Sundays. [...]  
I remember going to Sunday school with my sisters, [...]  
I remember the stirring music of the Salvation Army band.  
I remember the marching children in the band of hope, [...]  
I remember my first experience of crime and punishment. [...]  
I remember my mother and father merging into each other in my mind.  
Together, they  
were my symbol of peace and laughter and security.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom* (London: Faber, 1954), pp. 1-3.

There are striking resemblances between *Down Second Avenue* and *Tell Freedom* in terms of their representation of 'flashes of memory' and the fragmentary existence of the past and childhood. These episodic pieces of memory constitute a significant part of these writers' narrative construction of the self. 'No use trying to put the pieces together', as the narrator in *Down Second Avenue* says, 'pieces of my life. They are a jumble' (p. 77). While Mphahlele's perception of the self as fragmentary pieces in a jumble is enveloped in a self-victimizing tone prevalent in 'protest literature', it nevertheless establishes, in a constructive light, a new narrative depiction of time and memory that conforms to the aspirations for autonomous literary self-construction shared by black writers in this period.

Besides the episodic narrative patterns shown above, impressionistic lists of short phrases, as I have quoted earlier in Mphahlele's descriptions of his childhood in Maupaneng and the experiences of urban black life, also recur in *Down Second Avenue*. This is how he delineates the memory of Marabastad:

I was beginning to put into their proper places the scattered experiences of my life in Pretoria. Poverty; my mother's resignation; Aunt Dora's toughness; grandmother, whose ways bridged the past with the present, sticking to neither at any one time; police raids; the ten-to-ten curfew bell; encounters with whites; humiliations. But I only succeeded in reconstructing the nightmare which in turn harassed my powers of understanding. (p. 117)

The paradox accompanying the narrator's memory of Maupaneng reappears here in his memory of Marabastad. The desire to reconstruct the self in coherence, to 'put into their proper places the scattered experiences of my life', is obstructed by the failure of memory and by his inability to narrate and articulate. However, by leaving his past experiences as 'scattered' and fragmentary as they are, the narrative draws up an alternative temporal schema, which subverts a linear temporality and, like the memory of his grandmother, 'bridged the past with the present, sticking to neither at any one time'. The

fragments of memory also seem to obliterate the dichotomy between the country and the city established in a linear narrative of urbanization, which, as I have suggested at the beginning of this chapter, underpins a racially discriminatory formulation of black people and is complicit in the logic of apartheid's territorial control of the black population. Furthermore, the blurred boundary between childhood and adulthood destabilizes a racist developmental logic that undergirds apartheid's educational policies, which, as I have discussed in the Introduction, tended to discipline and control the black population by denying them opportunities for development and by seeking to keep them permanently in a state of childhood.<sup>37</sup> The nightmare Mphahlele refers to in this passage is as much about political oppression—poverty, police raids, the curfew bell, encounters with whites and consequent humiliations—as about epistemological obstacles, which 'harassed' his 'powers of understanding'. The self, which is unimaginable in a progressive temporal order that in many ways justifies apartheid ideology and its various legislations, is reinvented in Mphahlele's autobiographical account as having an existence in an 'urgent' present interwoven with a fragmentary past. The instability of childhood memory becomes the exact site where subjectivity reveals itself as contingent, slippery, and prone to change. At the same time, it is also from this alternative non-linear temporality that a new form of subjectivity can emerge.

If the narrative reconfiguration of temporality as reinvention of the black subject is an immanent feature in black autobiographies in the 1960s, it is brought to the centre in Jacob Dlamini's 2009 autobiography *Native Nostalgia*, in which Dlamini, also as an expatriate writer, offers his fragmentary narrative of childhood spent in the township of Katlehong in the 1970s. Written in the style of academic analytic prose, the introduction to *Native Nostalgia* foregrounds the political significance of memory's instability in narratives of the past, and the way in which time plays a crucial role in the construction and

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<sup>37</sup> It needs noting that Mphahlele was driven into exile because of his open opposition to the Bantu Education system.

reconstruction of black subjectivity in national historiography. Dlamini refers to the two types of nostalgia coined by Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). One is 'restorative nostalgia', which 'puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps'; and the other is 'reflective nostalgia', which 'dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance'.<sup>38</sup> 'There is no monumental past to recreate' in reflective nostalgia, and it 'cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space'.<sup>39</sup> Aligning with this second type of nostalgia, Dlamini's childhood recollection aims to restore certain aspects of the shape and texture of black life under apartheid, its 'fondness' in particular, by foregrounding the fragmentation of linear temporality and highlighting the sensory experience of 'smell, hearing, taste, touch and sight'.<sup>40</sup> This narrative strategy, as Dlamini points out, bears witness to the 'ongoing attempts to rescue South African history and the telling of it from what Cherryl Walker has correctly identified as the distorting master narrative of black dispossession that dominates the historiography of the struggle'.<sup>41</sup> Echoing aspects of the formal features in *Drum* writers' autobiographical representations of time, the fragmentary temporality that Dlamini evokes in his restorative nostalgia, and the critical energies it generates apply to reading as well. It is by constantly excavating new perspectives from texts in the past that we may critically revise certain forms of dogmatic historiography and allow new patterns of historical experience to emerge.

## Temporality of Exile

Es'kia Mphahlele is a significant figure in South African literary history, firstly

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<sup>38</sup> Jacob Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Johannesburg: Fanele, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

for his involvement with *Drum* and the Sophiatown Renaissance (although he never claimed himself to be a '*Drum* writer'), and secondly for his complex transnational and international vision after the *Drum* decade. He was one of the very few among the *Drum* writers who continued to write substantially after being driven into exile. For most exiled black South African writers in this period, the exilic condition turned out, despite the prospect for new forms of solidarity, to be a devastating challenge on a personal level and in terms of their creative output. Modisane never produced any substantial writing after *Blame Me on History*. Nat Nakasa jumped from a seven-storey building in New York in 1965 after long suffering from depression. Can Themba drank himself to death in Swaziland in 1967, one year after he left South Africa. The young poet Arthur Nortje died of a drug overdose in Oxford in 1970, at the age of 27.

Mphahlele's writing career, on the contrary, benefited tremendously from his twenty years of exile in East and West Africa, France, the Caribbean, and the United States, before his return to South Africa in 1976. His exile bore witness to the rise and flourishing of various modes of black thought across the globe: the sweep of decolonization and the rising African nationalism in East and West Africa; the work of Frantz Fanon and the legacies of Négritude in Francophone Africa; and African American cultural and intellectual work following the lineage of movements such as the Harlem Renaissance. While Mphahlele's intellectual trajectory showed active engagements with almost all the major currents of black diasporic thought and black internationalism of his time, his oscillating exploration into a diasporic identity had always been rooted in an adamant attachment to South Africa, to his home and community, which might partly explain his controversial homecoming in 1976. As Edward Said put it in the essay 'Reflections on Exile', 'exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. [...] Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstruct their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or

a restored people'.<sup>42</sup> Mphahlele's long exile and his commitment to South Africa, nevertheless, are not reflected in his thinking and writing as a triumphant story or a heroic odyssey but rather, in David Attwell's words, result in 'a complex, shifting, even ambivalent encounter'.<sup>43</sup> Despite the fact that Mphahlele's life and work demonstrate a consistently active participation in anti-apartheid and anti-colonial protests and the promotion of black cultural values, he has been very careful with any political or ideological affiliations. His attitudes towards any school of thought or political and artistic movements of a resistant nature are never straightforwardly supportive either. There are, however, profound critical energies embedded in his ambivalence, restlessness, and irresolution, which are particularly in alignment with the aesthetic sensibilities manifested in all his writing. He has on many occasions identified himself more with the role of a creative writer rather than that of a political spokesperson, the former being someone, in his own words, who is 'sensible of the ironies of acceptance and rejection, conflict and reconciliation'<sup>44</sup> and who 'courted no political confrontation [but] spoke of the drama of black life, its triumphs, defeats and survival'.<sup>45</sup>

*Down Second Avenue* was written at the beginning of Mphahlele's exile, but it already encapsulated the oscillating tension and struggle between a diasporic identity and his rootedness in home and tradition—one of the fundamental dialectics governing Mphahlele's entire writing career. In an interview, when asked about his motive for writing *Down Second Avenue*, Mphahlele drew a metaphorical parallel between his connection with home in the condition of exile and the process of growing up. He said,

Being in the condition of exile you want to tell the world what South Africa is like. What it means to grow up in South Africa

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<sup>42</sup> Edward Said, *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 177

<sup>43</sup> David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 112. For a detailed discussion of Mphahlele, see the whole chapter 'Fugitive Pieces: Es'kia Mphahlele in the Diaspora', pp. 111-36.

<sup>44</sup> Es'kia Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber, 1974), p. 72.

<sup>45</sup> Mphahlele, 'Landmarks', p.53.

right from day one. As a native of South Africa, you really have a strange land of childhood. A childhood in which perhaps the only love there is is between you and your mother, your father and within the family and ends there. [...] Adults seemed to gang up against children, and they seemed to feel that they display their own concerns about your growing up. It always struck me how one had to survive that adult siege. In time, you grow up and reconcile things and begin to understand your culture. I feel that in exile one wants to do this.<sup>46</sup>

In this passage, there is a parallel between the temporal dimension of a child's growth into adulthood and the spatial dimension of an exile's relationship with his home country. The process of growing up from a child to an adult is depicted in multiple spatial metaphors, in which South Africa is described as the 'strange land of childhood' and the condition of exile from apartheid as surviving an 'adult siege'. Based on Mphahlele's own explanations about his autobiography, to unravel the metaphorical link between childhood in the past and the land he has been forced to leave seems to be crucial to understanding the paradoxes and critical values entailed by his exilic condition. According to Attwell's study of the history of black writing in South Africa, the fundamental paradox in Mphahlele's career—his diasporic aspirations and his adherence to home—can be situated in a larger pattern in South African literary and cultural history, in a process of black intellectuals and writers using print culture to establish themselves 'as modern subjects, in direct opposition to the identities ascribed to them in colonial and apartheid ideology'.<sup>47</sup> The representation of time in Mphahlele's autobiography, which explores an exile's reconnection to his home country in the narrative of growing up, is therefore closely associated with the inscription of a modern subjectivity. This modern subject established in relation to time is not rigid but relies on a sense of openness, manifested in the ongoing engagement with the past coupled with the prospect for an unforeseen future. As the autobiography's ending suggests, what exile means to him is 'exposing

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<sup>46</sup> Es'kia Mphahlele, *Bury me at the Market Place: Es'kia Mphahlele and Company, letters 1943-2006*, ed. by N. Chabani Manganyi and David Attwell (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), p. 499.

<sup>47</sup> Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 4.



myself to the impacts of as many ways of life as possible' (p. 236).

This open structure seems to be the principle according to which Mphahlele arranges his whole autobiographical narrative in a multilayered temporal schema. One noticeable narrative technique in *Down Second Avenue* that contributes to this temporality is its series of Interludes—the seven short chapters that divide the main narrative into different sections. These compact sections, all consisting of fantastical internal monologues and written in the present tense, constitute an alternative temporal and stylistic dimension in parallel with the progression of realistic biographical time adopted in the main narrative. The following passage is from the first Interlude, which depicts the child, after moving to Second Avenue, imagining the curfew outside on a sleepless night.

Saturday night and it's ten to ten, I can hear the big curfew bell at the police station peal 'ten to ten, ten to ten, ten to ten' for the black man to be out of the streets to be home to be out of the policeman's reach. Year after year every night the sound of the bell floats in the air at ten minutes to ten and the Black man must run home and the Black man must sleep or have a night special permit. The whistle is very near now and hunted man must be in Second Avenue but the bell goes on pealing lustily and so Black man you must run wherever you are, run. Whistle sound dies away, the bell stops but still I cannot sleep because my back is aching and I am trying to stop my tears of pain so I jump over the others and feel my way to the door opening out on to the ten-foot passage where there is the bucket of water. (p. 45)

This stream-of-consciousness-like babbling inside a boy's mind goes on for three pages in a single long paragraph. It is as if Mphahlele is imitating the language of a child in a half-dreamy soliloquy consisting of an intermittent sequence of fantastical images. The people in his community, his brother, sister, grandmother, Aunt Dora, and the witchdoctor all appear in this soliloquy, mixing with the boy's fear of the curfew and the white policemen outside. The sense of urgency triggered by the curfew initiates a highly hybrid narrative in which a child's consciousness is fused with that of an adult, which not only

refers to the exiled adult author himself but also to a collective persona, the Black man with the capital 'B'. Such a narrative style creates a temporal dimension existing as a permanently protracted present, in which a specific historical moment of ten-to-ten on a Saturday night when the child is half asleep is replicated into 'year after year every night'. This non-linear temporality also gathers an ambiguous conflation between the individual and the collective, all driven by the urgency to run, to be a fugitive, and to exile.

All of the Interludes that follow are written in the same experimental stream-of-consciousness style. In discussing his motivation for using this special structural design, Mphahlele said:

I did the interludes at the same time. I would write about my people and the events they were caught up in, and then literally come to a stop and try to think about what these things were doing to me, and found I could not express it in the strict order of biography. So I decided on the method of the interlude.<sup>48</sup>

In a similar manner to the retrospective narrative voice encountered in the main body of the autobiography, these Interludes also reflect, at a structural level, the author's deliberate insertion of his self-critical voice in an attempt to show how past experiences are necessarily constructed through an authorial voice and a critical perspective rooted in the present. As these Interludes are mostly present-tense narrations that together form an independent and consistent whole in themselves, they also present an alternative temporal structure that substantially destabilizes a linear biographical temporal order governing the main body of the work. The distance between past and present, and between the adult narrator and the narrated childhood experience, seems to have disappeared in the present-tense and fantastical narration in these Interludes. The co-existence of childhood and adulthood through dreams and

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<sup>48</sup> *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972), p. 40.

mutual imaginings reveals a constant self-reflexivity that resonates with the author's reflections on home as a form of exile (and vice versa).

This overlapping and converging temporal schema is associated strongly with sensory experience. The following passage, from the second Interlude, in which the child remembers his father and also his time in the countryside with his grandmother, illustrates this point:

The smell of the paraffin from the stove and the smell of boiling potatoes and curry. An incident on a Sunday Morning. His mother and the mountain. [...] And then Leshoana river. The cruel river everyone has to cross. [...] Dark grey waters frowning at you as you stand on a little rising, not daring to come near, not daring to gaze too long. The deafening roar and long wailing cries along the course. [...] We play blissfully on its white sands, rolling about, feeling their tingling warmth. And then, suddenly we hear the sound of foam bubbles, but not until the water has licked a few of us. Then we jump away in fright, to see a low sheet of water spreading down. And terrified, breathless and foolish laughter among us. How playful violent things can be.

A shrill police whistle. My ribs are aching from lying down. (p. 77)

The 'incident on a Sunday morning' at the beginning of this passage refers to the disappearance of his alcoholic father, the memory of whom is always evoked through sensory experience. 'That was the last time I ever saw my father, that summer of 1932', as the narrator first mentions this incident in the main narrative, 'the strong smell of burning paraffin gas from a stove often reminds me of that Sunday' (p. 18). Here, memories of smell become more fragmented, as the narrative soon moves back from the incident of his father's disappearance to his childhood in the countryside and his memory of the Leshoana river. Related to senses of sound and touch, the river is described as having 'the deafening roar and long wailing cries', 'tingling warmth' and 'the sound of foam bubbles'. In its present-tense narration, the three specific events in different moments of his life—his father's disappearance on a Sunday morning in Marabastad, his childhood experience with the Leshoana river, and the narrator who hears the police whistle—all converge in sensory fragments

that belong to a permanent present. Indicated by the collective pronoun 'we', this narrative temporality established through sensory expressions again makes the specific experience of the individual author coincide with the collective experience of the black subject.

Mphahlele maintains that a clear objective behind writing *Down Second Avenue* is to present his own individual life as the metaphor for the collective experience of his community and his people. He reiterates this in two different interviews:

When I got down to writing it, I felt that this was something I wanted to emphasize even more than my individual life, I wanted my own individual life to sound very typical as, in fact, it has been, and instead of putting myself in the forefront, I made myself the vehicle of my people's experience.<sup>49</sup>

I thought I was saying to the reader, the reading public: here is the story of my life and it is not unique. It is shared by so many people, those at Maupaneng and in Marabastad. [...] I was saying that this is me, but it is not singularly me. To that extent, again it is a metaphor, a metaphor of self, a metaphor of the way our people lived and the way they struggled.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than simply ascribing a self-affirming collective political identity to the individual self, this metaphorical conflation of 'my individual life' and 'my people's experience' is constructed in *Down Second Avenue*, in a much more nuanced manner, through the representation of time. In the Interludes, it is particularly in their present-tense narrative where the permanency of the present is made up of a fragmented past that experience of the singular me becomes 'the vehicle of my people's experience'.

This metaphor of self that obliterates the distinction between 'individuality' and 'collectivity' in relation to time is also connected with the representation of place, as the recurrence of the ten-to-ten curfew bell ringing on a Saturday night

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<sup>49</sup> Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, *Towards African Literary Independence: A Dialogue with contemporary African Writers* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), p.133.

<sup>50</sup> Mphahlele, *Bury Me at the Market Place*, p. 497.

runs parallel with the recurring memory of Marabastad. This is the beginning of the third Interlude:

Marabastad is gone but there will always be Marabastads that will be going until the screw of the vice breaks. Too late maybe, but never too soon. And the Black man keeps moving on, as he has always done the last three centuries, moving with baggage and all, for ever tramping with bent backs to give way for the one who says he is stronger. [...] I have been moving up and down Second Avenue since I was born and never dreamt I should ever jump out of the nightmare. (p. 165)

The specificity of a place and of individual experience is transformed here again into a collective one belonging to 'the Black man'. A permanent present consisting of a repeated past is linked to a repetition of place, which turns a specific 'Marabastad' to multiple 'Marabastads'. There seems to be a sense of commitment to place as the adult narrator keeps returning to Second Avenue in Marabastad in his memory, but the prolonged and endless replication of Marabastad, together with a sense of the past as a repeated existence in a permanent present, also seems to obscure such commitment. In a frequently quoted article, Mphahlele observed that black South African writers must 'come to terms with the tyranny of place, [...] because his writing depends on his commitment to territory'.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the way in which his autobiography organizes time, especially through these Interludes, seems to disturb this notion of the tyranny of place. In fact, Mphahlele's use of the unfavourable term 'tyranny' exactly suggests his critical attitude towards such a commitment to territory, which is not so much a desired as imposed situation symptomatic of exiled writers' condition of being driven out of their home country. In *Down Second Avenue*, the narrative of the self as a continual process of reliving one's childhood transgresses the 'tyranny' of place by mapping the recurring memory of Marabastad onto his ceaselessly shifting locations. Near the end of the

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<sup>51</sup> Es'kia Mphahlele, 'The Tyranny of Place and Aesthetics in South African Literature', in *Race and Literature*, ed. by Charles Malan (Pinetown, South Africa: Owen Burgess Publishers, 1987), pp. 48-59 (p. 54).

autobiography, when the adult narrator is facing his exile after being banned from teaching in the township of Orlando, he describes the township as ‘a glorified Marabastad. Saturday night is the same as it was twenty-five years ago in Marabastad minus the ten-to-ten bell’ (p. 193). It is as if a fragmentary and repeated past also contributes to a shifting heterogeneity of places, in which narrative of the individual self existing in a specific location in a specific time becomes the expression of a collective destiny where ‘the Black man keeps moving on, as he has always done the last centuries’.

### **Temporality of Sophiatown**

While Mphahlele’s representation of place in his childhood memory mobilizes a variety of locations from the countryside of Maupaneng to the townships of Marabastad and Orlando, Modisane’s autobiography is devoted to Sophiatown, the monumental township that rose to fame in the 1950s but continued to inspire artists and writers after its demolition under apartheid bulldozers. In 1897 an investor named Herman Tobiansky bought land in West Johannesburg and named it after his wife, Sophia. Originally intended to develop as a white suburb, Sophiatown gradually became a residential area for black population after the Johannesburg Town Council’s decision to build sewage disposal facilities near it. Because of the Native Land Act of 1913 that severely restricted the black population’s rights to own land, freehold townships including Sophiatown and the rest of the western region of Johannesburg became the ideal place for black settlement from the 1920s onwards.<sup>52</sup> With the rapid increase of population and the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of its residents, a lively culture of urban community soon started to flourish in Sophiatown, which its local residents called Kofifi. Don Mattera described

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<sup>52</sup> David Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004), p. 3.

Sophiatown at the peak of its energy and vitality: ‘every conceivable space was occupied by a living thing—man or animal’.<sup>53</sup> After its cultural heyday in the 1940s and early 1950s and the forced removal of its residents in 1955, a white suburb named Triomf, meaning ‘triumph’, was erected on its remains. Meg Samuelson calls Sophiatown ‘the urban palimpsest’, a topographical parchment on which the process of urban modernity is constructed under continuous inscription and reinscription.<sup>54</sup> Besides work by the *Drum* writers and Marlene van Niekerk’s much-celebrated post-apartheid novel *Triomf* (1994), Sophiatown has also been a recurring subject in South Africa’s visual culture, including photographs by Jürgen Schadeberg, Ernest Cole, and Bob Bosani, Lionel Rogosin’s 1959 film *Come Back, Africa*, and two more recent cinematic productions, *Sophiatown: Surviving Apartheid* (2003) and *Drum* (2004).<sup>55</sup>

Modisane’s autobiography, *Blame Me on History*, plays a significant part in this historical process of writing Sophiatown as a fluid urban fiction and a discursive spatial trope. While shifting meanings attached to the place are played out diachronically in varieties of cultural texts written over it, the place is also represented within *Blame Me on History* itself as a spatial trope that reveals the contingencies of history and gives rise to narratives of the black subject against the fixity of linear temporal structures. Written as an elegy to the township in which Modisane has spent his childhood and youth, the autobiography juxtaposes material fragments of the demolished Sophiatown with fragments of his childhood memory. In addition, reinvention of the self through such fragmentary representation of time and place is especially tied to two recurring motifs: violence upon the black male body, and the experience of death.

Starting from the moment of the narrator watching over the ruins of

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<sup>53</sup> Don Mattera, *Gone with the Twilight; A Story of Sophiatown* (London; New Jersey: Zed, 1987), p. 49

<sup>54</sup> Meg Samuelson, ‘The Urban Palimpsest: Re-presenting Sophiatown’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44 (2008), 63-75 (p. 63).

<sup>55</sup> Narratives about Sophiatown also contain varieties of transnational elements. See Katharina Fink, ‘Close-up Sophiatown: Transnational Perspectives on Past, Present and Future of an Iconic Suburb’, *African Studies*, 74 (2015), 10-25.

Sophiatown as an adult, descriptions of the derelict debris of the demolished township in front of his eyes alternate with narratives of his life and flashbacks to his childhood memory. The link between the destroyed place and its residents is established first and foremost in the narrative through visceral depictions of the physical body and of physical violence. 'Sophiatown was like one of its own victims', as Modisane describes it, 'a man gored by the knives of Sophiatown, lying in the open gutters, a raisin in the smelling drains, dying of multiple stab wounds, gaping wells gushing forth blood' (p. 5). The personification of Sophiatown also suggests an ambiguous slippage between the communal/collective and the individual sense of the self. Embodied by its numerous victims, Sophiatown at the same time also 'belonged to me; when we were not shaking hands or chasing the same girl or sharing a bottle of brandy, we were sticking knives into each other's back' (p. 15).

Serving as the vehicle that yokes together narratives of the place and the self, the revelation of physical violence is also woven into another motif, death, the recurrence of which becomes, paradoxically, the dominant experience of the narrator's childhood and his growth. 'Something in me died', as he laments on the sight of the demolished Sophiatown, 'a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown' (p. 5). Mirroring the death of Sophiatown, narrative reinvention of the self pivots on the narrator's fragmentary recollection of his sister's and his father's death. 'I learned early in life to play games with death, to realize its physical presence in my life, to establish rapport with it' (p. 18). The following narrative then alternates between descriptions of Sophiatown, which is present in front of the narrator's eyes, and memories of his past experience of his family's deaths as a child. 'Standing over the death of Sophiatown, another death came into my consciousness' (p. 18). After recounting his sister Nancy's death because of malnutrition, he 'switched off the memory machine, but there was another kind of death gaping at me' (p. 19). Again, after witnessing the ruins of the house where he was born and also a funeral train passing by, the narrator then turns to his childhood memory of his father's death when he was fourteen.



While he remembers his father's dead body in the past as 'the swollen mass of broken flesh and blood, [...] there were no eyes nor mouth, nose, only a motionless ball' (p. 26), this experience of death in all its physicality also leaves its mark upon his own body in the present—'the horror and the pain of death would focus on the nightmarish sight of my father, and I fall into a state of anxiety and develop an itch all over my body, scratching until my skin bleeds; the pain becomes a reprimand, the physical moment of punishment' (p. 27). It is as if the physical violence contained in death replaces the linear progression of time and becomes the fulcrum against which the present narrating self and his past experience as a child are drawn together. It is also the coexistence of the physical presence of death and the living physical body that temporalizes the narrative into a fragmentary representation of history, upon which, as the title of the autobiography seems to suggest, the self is engraved.

The association between the rhetoric of physical violence and critique of the kind of historicism based on linear temporality reminds us of Frantz Fanon's seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), in which he lays out the ambivalent psyche of the black subject through a visceral description of the effects of violence upon the black masculine body.

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. [...] I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. [...] I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin'. [...] What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?<sup>56</sup>

Sacrifice of the body here evokes the real as well as psychic violence that colonialism enacts on the black subject. More importantly, in Fanon's

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<sup>56</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), p. 124.

compelling prose, the black body figures as a narrative trope to disrupt colonialist forms of knowledge and the Western historicist master narrative based on a linear temporality. Homi Bhabha's 1986 foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks* points out that the force of Fanon's vision comes from 'the language of a revolutionary awareness' in which, as he quotes Walter Benjamin, 'the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight'.<sup>57</sup> It is also by speaking from inside such a state of emergency that a possible voice of critique can truly emerge. 'The struggle against colonial oppression', as Bhabha suggests, 'changes not only the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist "idea" of time as a progressive, ordered whole'.<sup>58</sup> While commenting on Fanon's rhetoric of the Black man's body, Bhabha argues that 'the White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed'.<sup>59</sup> Confronting the white man's eyes, the dismemberment of the Black man's body in Fanon's text not only evokes the real physical violence of colonialism but also bespeaks a trope of critique against the order of Western historicism through which 'blackness' is constructed in various forms of deficiency and inferiority.

It is on this epistemological level that Fanon's writing reverberates with *Blame Me on History* in terms of the radical postures in both of their work and the ways in which such radicalism, delivered through the rhetoric of physical violence, can be interpreted in relation to our post-colonial, post-apartheid and post-revolutionary present. But to appropriate Bhabha's analytic model in his interpretation of Fanon directly to Modisane's text would be to ignore the very local specific historical context behind it. As I have shown through Nkosi's and Mphahlele's writing, for a black South African writer in the 1950s and the 60s, narrative constructions of the self hinged not so much on simply the broad

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<sup>57</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Foreword', in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 1986), p. xxiv.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. xxiv.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. xxv.

categories of opposition between the West and the colonial subject as on more complex local manifestations of racial relationships and power structures both within and beyond South Africa. Nevertheless, Bhabha's reading is useful here because it offers a way to turn the trope of the black body and violence towards a reconceptualization of time and history—a significant aspect of the subversive power in narratives and theories of the black subject. Using the psychoanalytic model, the transgressive energy in Fanon's writing is also constantly anchored in the notion of childhood as a site of contingency to speak against the historicist notion of time as organized in a progressive order from the past to the present. As Fanon suggests near the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*,

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.

Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible. Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. At the beginning of his life a man is always clotted, he is drowned in contingency. The tragedy of the man is that he was once a child.<sup>60</sup>

Here, what Fanon proposes is a rejection of relating to the past in an essentialist gesture of turning to tradition, to the 'inhuman voices of ancestors'; rather, one is to subvert the order of historical master narratives as such and thus to recuperate the self through the contingency of the child one once was.

Mirroring Fanon's evocation of the child, Modisane's recollection of childhood also serves as a metaphor for historical contingency, which disrupts the causal, fixed relationship between the past and the present. Besides the reciprocal inscription of the urban space and the physical body, *Blame Me on History* also destabilizes a linear temporality through the paradox of African masculinity. Echoing Fanon's theory, Modisane's narrative model of the black subject as the child is staged in a boy's growth into manhood and is

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<sup>60</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 180.

emphatically masculine. However, by narrating the child's growth as a process of repeatedly reliving the father's death, whose physical presence ironically indicates a form of emasculation, the narrative also makes paradoxical and anxious the forms of masculinity it endorses.

The male-dominated literary scene in the *Drum* decade largely influenced the ways in which ideas about gender were configured around *Drum* and the Sophiatown Renaissance in general. In Dorothy Driver's study of the representation of women and femininity in *Drum* magazine, she points out that this literary and cultural renaissance was 'constructed at women's expense' and 'negotiated largely by means of belittling and damaging misrepresentations of women'.<sup>61</sup> The imperative issue of racial identity 'obliterated gender difference', as she argues, 'as if a subjectivity specific to African femininity did not after all exist'.<sup>62</sup> In a similar vein, ideas about masculinity were also constructed problematically due to the prioritized demands of a racial discourse. Lindsay Clowes observes that, while pitching an urban modern black identity as opposed to a rural and traditional one, *Drum* magazine nevertheless paradoxically 'found itself simultaneously reinforcing Western rather than African versions of manhood'.<sup>63</sup> According to both Driver and Clowes, there was an underlying tension between categories of gender and race in this period that largely problematized the reinvention of the black subject in terms of their gender roles. When it came to the representation of masculinity by the male writers I have been discussing in this chapter, this tension derived, I would argue, not so much from the distinctive features between 'Western' and 'African' versions of manhood, as Clowes seems to suggest, as from a developmental logic which existed simultaneously in discourse of gender formation and in colonial and apartheid ideology, in which the African subject was always cast as the

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<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Driver, 'Drum Magazine (1951-9) and the Spatial Configurations of Gender', in *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, ed. by Kate-Darian-Smith and others (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 231-42 (p. 231)

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>63</sup> Lindsay Clowes, 'Masculinity, Matrimony and Generation: Reconfiguring Patriarchy in Drum 1951-1983', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34 (2008), 179-92 (p. 192).

equivalent to the child, the boy, and therefore could never fully attain adult manhood and mature masculinity per se.

*Blame Me on History* stages fully its deep anxiety about forms of masculinity in which it is implicated by placing its narrative voice in the position of the child whose growth is stuck between an absent dead father and his own failed fatherhood. Memory of his father's dead body as 'no eyes nor mouth, nose, only a motionless ball' (p. 26)—his death as emasculation—becomes the child's rite of passage. At his father's funeral, he sees his own name mistakenly carved on his father's coffin, which makes him realize that 'I was officially dead' (p. 31). It is also at this moment, ironically, that he turns from a boy to a man. In Modisane's narrative of the self, there is always the entanglement between the process of growing up and dying, and the conflation between the child's acquisition of masculinity and the father's emasculation. What is being challenged here is not only a subjugated racial identity implicated in a linear historicist narrative but also a narrative of masculinity modeled upon a patriarchal structure secured by generational continuity from fathers to sons, who in turn become fathers. By configuring time through the entanglement of childhood and adulthood, *Blame Me on History* addresses the paradox of its own adherence to masculinity while at the same time fundamentally subverts a developmental temporal logic that buttresses the colonial and apartheid's formulation of the black subject.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of *Drum* in South African literary history is unquestionable. Its publications (mostly short stories) marked a substantial beginning in black writing as they fully encapsulated the tension between a dynamic urban modernity and apartheid's retrogressive policies. Its short-lived effervescence also laid the foundation for some black writers' later intellectual and literary

productions after being driven into exile. Autobiography was the dominant genre in these writers' long narrative prose works, which have been usually read as realistic 'records' of the evils of the apartheid government and as serving the purpose of political protest. Nevertheless, stylistic and aesthetic innovations in these autobiographical narratives, which also bore a close relation to *Drum*, indicate profound epistemological subversions that help to reinvent the self as modern subject.

This process of subverting and reinscribing modern subjectivity was particularly embedded in the narrative reconfiguration of temporality through the instability of childhood memory. In the rhetoric of urgency, the poetics of exile, and the commitment to place in these autobiographical narratives, the racialized and gendered modern subject was rendered as resisting a linear progressive temporal logic and adulthood as being suspended in the constant emergence of the child. Such representation of the black subject as the child in *Drum* writers' autobiographies was to find resonances in many works that came after. Besides Dlamini's autobiography, Athol Fugard's novel *Tsotsi* (1980) and Njabulo Ndebele's collection of short stories *Fools and Other Stories* (1983), both depicting urban experiences, used the figure of the child as the symbol and embodiment of the black subject as time of entanglement and emergence. To trace the issue of temporality back to *Drum* writers, especially in their polemical rhetoric in the midst of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid resistance, I am also raising questions about historiography: how to read the past with a consciousness in the present and how literary aesthetics and literary forms contribute to our understanding of a historical present—lessons that are still needed in the post-apartheid moment.

## Chapter 2

### Nadine Gordimer: Childhood as Metamorphosis

In the opening scene of Nadine Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days* (1953), the seven-year-old protagonist Helen Shaw takes a short excursion into the stores in an African community one Sunday afternoon after her white parents have left her alone in their house. On her way back, when she comes across a black man urinating by the road, her reactions are as follows:

Not a shock but a sudden press of knowledge, hot and unwanted, came upon me. A question that had waited inside me but had never risen into words or thoughts because there were no words for it—no words with myself, my mother, with Olwen even. I began to run, very fast, along the tar, the smooth straight road.<sup>1</sup>

In what seems to be a crucial moment of Helen Shaw's sexual awakening, her new experience is first and foremost juxtaposed with an explicit awareness of the incompetence of language. The epistemological register that language necessarily creates thus becomes something only to be delivered through physical sensations, as 'a sudden press, [...] hot and unwanted', a sudden gallop, and the child's visual impression of 'the tar, the smooth straight road'. In this encounter between a white child and a black man—a moment that seems to have initiated the child's rite of passage, words are not the prerequisite medium to express her physical and mental development but only demarcate the very limitation of knowledge that obfuscates her perceptions and suspends her *Bildung*. As I will explain in more detail in due course, the words insufficient for the child to delineate her reactions towards the black man have their origin in a

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<sup>1</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Victor Gollanez, 1953), p. 15. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

racist ideology, which is refracted in the novel through the protagonist's mother's pejorative descriptions of black people in her everyday language. In this uncanny moment of contact between a white child and a black man, the novelistic imagining of a child's narrative perspective contains a message of ideological critique against the consciousness of white privilege embodied by the mother figure. Compared with the parents as linguistically formed and ideologically fixed subjects, the child, who possesses a limited linguistic repertoire yet exhibits a particular rootedness in sensory experience, evokes a potentially liberating vision in which the parent's authority and inculcation are exposed as problematic and contingent.

Although the reactions of Helen Shaw's body are suggestive of the potential to counter the mother's authoritative words of racism, the question remains whether or not such narratives of the body can eventually resist, bypass, or transcend ideological confines completely. In this short passage, there is a strong sense of ambivalence accompanying the white girl's perception of the black man. Her narrative voice does not simply indicate that the body's experience can somehow be grasped as an alternative form of knowledge—as opposed to the epistemological realm constructed through language that shapes the racial supremacist consciousness of the adult. On the contrary, the narrative seems to present the child's body as unintelligible, which denies any means of comprehension or articulation at all. Rather than symbolizing a moment of resistance in which the body stands outside language and against a racist ideology, Helen Shaw's sexual awakening is described as an ambiguous moment of emergence in which the child's body attests to the boundaries and limitations of knowledge itself and opens up a perpetual vision of possibility towards the unknown.

Helen Shaw's response towards the realities of a world beyond the confines of her parents' language, which is, ironically, also the only language that she herself is able to speak, stages a significant narrative vision containing a critical edge as well as the possibility for emergent transformation. Engendered by the



figure of a child in Gordimer's debut novel, this self-reflexive mode of critique, which indicates an open prospect for potential change in the future, is to find recurrent reverberations in the author's ongoing novelistic engagement with the realities of South Africa's shifting historical climate—through apartheid and its aftermath—in a writing career spanning more than sixty years. Stephen Clingman calls Gordimer's novels 'history from inside' primarily because of their immediate and direct responsiveness towards the significant social and political events in South African history.<sup>2</sup>

In tandem with these events, a brief trajectory of Gordimer's writing career may be summarized as follows. Largely influenced by political liberalism after the National Party's accession to power in 1948, she was an active participant in the vibrant multi-racial cultural scene clustered around *Drum* magazine in the 1950s. The Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, the subsequent failures of a series of sabotage attempts in the early 1960s, and the eventual dissolution of the Liberal Party in 1968 also bore witness to Gordimer's disillusionment with liberal humanist ideals and her gradual transformation to endorsing the radical eradication of the apartheid regime. The Black Consciousness Movement, emerging in the late 1960s, with its separatist doctrines that rejected the participation of all white people in the anti-apartheid struggle, posed a serious challenge to Gordimer's own dissident political position. The Soweto Revolt of 1976, which signaled a new phase in the resistance movements against the apartheid government, pushed Gordimer to further examine and adjust her political, historical, and literary identity as a white writer and also to envision new conditions for white people's political participation in a post-revolutionary future. Her post-apartheid writing continued to critique racism permeating South African society and showed her growing attention to transnationalism and issues of HIV/AIDS. While all of the significant historical events mentioned above are directly represented in Gordimer's novels, this does not mean that her writing is only reactive to these historical markers. Her response shows that

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from Inside* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

she is as much a commentator on as an inscriber of historical processes. Similar to a white child's response towards a black man in *The Lying Days*, which is formulated in the tension between the child's autonomous expression of her body and a realization of the limitation of her knowledge, Gordimer's response towards South Africa's shifting political situation has always been established in the tension between a proactive individual intervention into history and a critical awareness of the limitation of one's own social, historical, and ideological conditions. As Clingman puts it, the exposure of limitations is significant in Gordimer's novels, and it is by paying attention to 'the notions of contradictions and silences within the text' that 'the contours of Gordimer's historical consciousness will emerge'.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, my reading of the representation of childhood in Gordimer's novels derives from Clingman's notion of 'historical consciousness' as exposure of limitations. Often staged in a generational drama, the contingencies of childhood in Gordimer's novels are depicted as the site where limitations of various ideologies, epistemological systems, and political identities that formulate her characters' subject positions are repeatedly contested and consequently exposed to situations of uncertainty. While these moments may signal discomfort and potential danger, they also indicate possibilities for change.<sup>4</sup> Rita Barnard points out that metamorphosis is the key term to understand the politics and ethics of Gordimer's writing. Often manifested in characters in privileged situations being pushed to precarious grounds with entirely open futures, metamorphosis is crucial to Gordimer's strenuous and radical self-critique of white privilege.<sup>5</sup> Such critique is as much of a political nature as about aesthetics and knowledge production. Gordimer's anti-apartheid and anti-racist stance is always inextricably bound up with her

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Lars Engle uses Freud's concept of the uncanny to account for the politics of the recurring contingent moments in Gordimer's novels. See Lars Engle, 'The Political Uncanny: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (1989), 101-27.

<sup>5</sup> Rita Barnard, "'The Keeper of Metamorphosis': Nadine Gordimer', *Development and Change*, 46 (2015), 934-48.

critical engagement with varieties of literary and intellectual currents, such as liberalism and the liberal novel, Marxist literary and cultural criticism, and African literary culture, to name the most important ones. My reading of Gordimer's work that follows thus explores the ways in which the trope of the child is tightly related to her engagement with these intellectual and cultural traditions, both within and beyond national borders. My chief focus will be two of her novels, *The Lying Days* and *Burger's Daughter* (1979), as each represents her literary innovations in the use of the *Bildungsroman* form, from very different periods of political and historical significance. Along the way, I will also make reference to some of her other writings—other novels, short stories, and critical essays—to illuminate certain patterns of continuity and change in her work during the apartheid era.

### ***The Lying Days* and Questions of Form**

As Gordimer's debut novel, *The Lying Days* has attracted the least critical attention among her oeuvre partly because of its limited formal innovations, especially when compared with her more experimental later works. Relying on the shape and structure of European *Bildungsroman*, the novel traces the protagonist Helen Shaw's growing awareness of her identity broadly according to a linear temporality. Bearing close autobiographical resemblance to Gordimer's own childhood and youthful years in a mining town in the erstwhile Transvaal, the novel follows the growth of its first-person narrator from the confines of a white middle-class household to her gradual development of a racial and political consciousness. Despite its conformity to the conventional European *Bildungsroman* form, the novel already shows elements of Gordimer's initial formal critique of the ideological underpinnings of the novel of development. As Dominic Head points out, the pervasive sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity running throughout this novel suggests Gordimer's artistic

innovations, indicating that she 'is already making headway in her pursuit of appropriate forms to encompass her message of requisite cultural and political change'.<sup>6</sup> There are modernist aesthetic features and postmodernist metafictional elements that disrupt traditional European generic conventions. Certain literary tropes, especially those concerning the child and the family, that are to be invested with more profound sociopolitical meanings in later works are also already present in this debut novel.

As I have suggested, the novel's narrative critique of a racist ideology is staged in the tension between the child's body and her ambivalent distance from the mother's words. The first part of the novel in numerous instances dramatizes this distance in its depiction of Helen Shaw's childhood experience, particularly through the use of irony.<sup>7</sup> The imitation of a child's consciousness and her perceptions of the world is often refracted through an ironic repetition of her mother's words.

Yes, I knew that, an unwritten law so sternly upheld and generally accepted that it would occur to no child to ask why: a little girl must not be left alone because there were native boys about. That was all. Native boys were harmless and familiar because they were servants, or delivery boys bringing the groceries or the fish by bicycle from town, or Mine boys something to laugh at in their blankets and their clay-spiked hair, but at the same time they spoke and shouted in a language you didn't understand and dressed differently in any old thing, and so were mysterious. Not being left alone because they were about was simply something to do with their mysteriousness. (p. 4)

The red dust path turning off to the stores was somewhere I had never been. There were children on the Mine, little children in pushcarts whose mothers let the nurse girls take them anywhere they liked; go down to the filthy kaffir stores to gossip with the boys and let those poor little babies they're supposed to be taking care of breathe in heaven knows what dirt and disease, my mother often condemned. (pp. 8-9)

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<sup>6</sup> Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Gordimer's use of irony in her fiction, see Brighton J. Uledi Kamanga, *Nadine Gordimer's Fiction and the Irony of Apartheid* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).

What we see in both passages is an ambiguous blend of two voices, the mother's and the child's, which are hardly distinguishable from each other. The explicit racist language the mother uses to describe black men, whether it is the infantilized naming of them as 'native boys' or the pejorative descriptions of their life, such as 'filthy kaffir stores' and 'let those poor little babies they're supposed to be taking care of breathe in heaven knows what dirt and disease', is always bracketed in a tone of irony in which the child, although not being able to offer alternative explanations, holds a deliberate distance from the mother. While Helen Shaw clearly is suspicious of the logic in her mother's warning about 'Native boys', 'delivery boys', or 'Mine boys', her attempts to use an alternative language to refer to black people beyond her mother's racist naming of them only end up in an ambiguous conclusion about them being 'mysterious'. In the ironic repetition of the adult's racist language through which the child speaks, there is also an authorial voice looming behind the narration. The use of a past-tense retrospective narrative perspective in both passages above suggests the existence of an adult narrator, who is aware of the ironic distance between the child and the mother. Such awareness that frames the child's ironic voice mirrors as much the narrative perspective of the adult Helen Shaw as the authorial voice of Gordimer, whose awareness of textuality is reflected here in a critical distance between the self that speaks and the text through which one is speaking.

This critical awareness of textuality is foregrounded in Gordimer's depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in this novel. Mrs Shaw's existence for Helen is not so much personal, emotional, and concrete, as it is formal and linguistic. Divested of much emotional content, this mother-daughter relationship only exists in an abstract and discursive dimension. Helen sees her mother as a woman who 'accepted marriage and motherhood as a social rather than a mysterious personal relationship' (p. 31). Such a social, rather than personal, function of motherhood is established in a plethora of dialogic interactions between the mother and the daughter. Each time Helen mentions

her mother there is either an ironic repetition of her language or a straightforward recognition of the limitation of her words. A significant detail illustrating the textual and abstract nature of the mother's authority manifests itself in the books she gives Helen to read: fairy tales, 'stories of children living the ordinary domestic adventures of the upper-middle-class English family' (p. 11), and 'gentle novels of English family life' (p. 31). While the reason behind Mrs. Shaw's choice of children's books is her highly ironized assertion that 'I don't believe a girl should grow up not knowing what life is like' (p. 40), these books are in fact not so much about 'life' as about moral and behavioral restrictions upon children and about controlling them within the confines of the domestic space.

Partly as a result of Gordimer's own childhood experience—she was kept at home by her mother because of a spurious heart ailment—the over-possessive mother figures as a recurrent trope in her novels, symbolizing the dominance of political and ideological control as well as the insular consciousness of white privilege.<sup>8</sup> In an interview in 1963, she described her identity as a writer through the metaphor of one's 'two births': 'first you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race'.<sup>9</sup> This trope of parental authority is bound up with a significant spatial metaphor too: 'the mother's house'. Domestic space within the white suburban home symbolizes, as Barnard puts it, 'the quintessential colonial space; the most intimate of South Africa's many ideological enclosures'.<sup>10</sup> In Gordimer's critique of these ideological enclosures in her novelistic discourse, it is always the child that has the liberating potential to cross the boundaries of the mother's house, to break free from the mother's control, and therefore to embody the critique of ideological barriers. In *The Lying Days*, the child's reaction towards the European domestic

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of this motif of the over-possessive mother, see John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/ Public Landscapes* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> John Barkham, 'South Africa: Perplexities, Brutalities, Absurdities', *Saturday Review*, January 12 1963, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 48.

fictions her mother gives her to read somehow exposes the colonialist assumptions underlying the circulation of imperial cultural production in the colonies.<sup>11</sup> Reversing the ideological dominance of the centre of the metropole, Helen sees 'the commonplaces of European childhood' as 'weird and exotic' (p. 31). The cautionary tale of Hansel and Gretel, which delivers its warning message to children by exhibiting the dangers beyond the domestic space, is on the contrary interpreted by Helen as a tale of allure. The unknown world represented by the gingerbread house in the woods holds the same fascination for the child as the world beyond her own house—the stores in an African community to which her mother forbids her to go. The child's potential to break away from ideological controls is thus established in a filial as well as spatial relationship, in which she is able to envision a liberating prospect for a space beyond domestic boundaries where she can be 'anonymous, nobody's children' (p. 31).

In contrast to the mother's house that symbolizes moral constraint and authoritarian control, the street is 'the site of a certain democratic possibility'.<sup>12</sup> The street is the place, in Gordimer's own words, that 'has held both the flesh and the word'.<sup>13</sup> In Helen Shaw's excursion onto the street, the ironic distance between the child's consciousness and the adult's words is replaced by a lyrical rendering of expression of the 'flesh', of the child's body. Whether it is her sudden memory of the sea 'remembered by the blood [...] caused by [...] reactions purely physically', or a taste of the scab on her knee, Helen Shaw's adventure outside the walls of her mother's house is described in an episodic list of sensory experiences, particularly of her visual perceptions (pp. 7-8). As the girl passes along the counter in the concession stores, her eyes painstakingly capture even the minutest details of the objects and people's appearances in the stores 'The dark brown faces', as she describes them, 'dark as teak and dark as

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<sup>11</sup> I am reminded here of Frantz Fanon's discussion of the circulation of European children's magazines and comic books in the Antilles. See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), pp. 112-14.

<sup>12</sup> Barnard, *Apartheid*, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (London: Cape, 1988), p. 54.

mahogany, shining with the warm grease of their own liveness lighting up their skin' (p. 9-15). She feels as if 'I held my buttocks stiffly together as I went along, looking, looking. But I felt my eyes were not quick enough, and darted here and there at once, fluttering over everything, unable to see anything singly and long enough' (p. 10). Rather than being stagnant and self-enclosed, these experiences of the flesh, particularly captured by the child's eyes, are transmittable not in words but in further physical expression. Feelings of fascination and bewilderment result first in the child's uncontrollable desire to laugh—'I wanted to giggle, to stuff my hand in my mouth so that a squeal, like a long squeeze of excitement, should not wring through me'—and then in a 'tingling fascination' and a 'shudder of revulsion at finding my finger going out wanting to touch' (pp. 10-12).

This episode of a child's experience outside her house, which concludes in her encounter with a black man urinating by the road, addresses a crucial set of dialectics running throughout this novel as well as Gordimer's works that follow: the dialectic between language and the body. Helen's adventure on the street, which is also an adventure of her own body, constitutes a significant motif in the process of her *Bildung*, a process of breaking away from the mother's control. Such physical experience of childhood adventure repeats itself in Helen's growth, bearing witness to her ongoing sceptical attitude towards the language she learns from her mother and her constant affirmation of her body as a form of knowledge. 'I knew that to know the names is to know less than to know that there can be no names, are no names', as she says, only 'my body was real, and its knowledge' (p. 92). Notwithstanding that the novel stages its recurrent emphasis on the mobility of the body as an alternative form of knowledge as opposed to the rigidity of 'names', distinction between the body and language is never clear. While the novel itself does not explore fully the political significance of the ambiguous existence of the body, Gordimer's more comprehensive and thorough critique of racism and apartheid in her later work echoes in numerous instances this literary motif.



In one of her most influential addresses, 'Living in the Interregnum' (1983), Gordimer points out how the body, especially the eyes, is the exact site where racism operates and maintains its ideological construction of the white subject. As she says,

[t]he weird ordering of the collective life, in South Africa, has slipped its special contact lens into the eyes of the whites; we actually *see* blacks differently, which includes not seeing, not noticing their unnatural absence.<sup>14</sup>

Apartheid manifests itself not only in state violence enforced upon human bodies, including those of children, but also in the ordinary senses and capacities of the body in everyday life. It imposes its effects on the ways in which bodies can and cannot act, feel, desire, and see. Here, as Gordimer points out, white privilege performs itself through the eyes and the act of seeing in all its distortion and failure. Linking this back to *The Lying Days*, we see that Helen Shaw's eyes, when she is in the concession store looking insatiably at objects and people around her, exhibit the subversive potential to strip off the 'special contact lens' slipped into the eyes of white people. Although the child's act of seeing does not result in any substantial outcome or structural change as she eventually returns to her mother's house, it creates a moment of slippage between reality and the consciousness of white supremacy when the authority of the latter is exposed and undermined.

Another text that may form a dialogue with the child's experience in *The Lying Days* and the mode of critique it entails is the short story 'Once upon a Time' (1992), which mirrors the novel's negative portrayal of children's fairy tales. Satirically adopting the narrative pattern of a fairy tale, the short story is given a tragic ending in which the wish for 'a life happily ever after' only ends in the destruction of a child's body. In the story, in order to protect their child from

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<sup>14</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', *New York Review of Books*, 20 January 1983, p. 22.

the supposed dangers of a violent society, white parents beset by paranoid fantasies set razor wire around their house. Their boy, mistaking such a life for a fairy tale, 'pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life', and is found at the end of the story as 'the bleeding mass [...] hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers'.<sup>15</sup> The metaphor of the mother's house reappears in this story, symbolizing in more violent terms the inimical psyche of white privilege that operates in the name of parents' protection over children. Published during the period of the nation's transition to democracy, the portrayal of a child's violated body in this story echoed years of political struggle, one prominent symbol of which, as I discussed in the Introduction to the thesis, was violence inflicted upon children's bodies. It was also a period when Gordimer's writing began to show more metafictional qualities, associating political content with more reflections on writing and textuality.<sup>16</sup> The child's mutilated body in 'Once upon a Time' thus also serves as a nodal point that breaks the generic convention and ideological closure of fairy tales. Its moral message cloaked in the illusionary promises of a 'life happily ever after' is exposed as a means of social control operated through the education of children.

The metafictional disruption of European literary conventions is already present in *The Lying Days*. In terms of the novel's own generic basis as *Bildungsroman*, the narrative also persistently and self-reflexively puts to question its closure, suspending Helen Shaw's *Bildung* till the very end. Her affirmation of the body never amounts to a comprehensive realization of the self outside her mother's influence but only constantly gestures towards a movement away from the attainment of adulthood. Underneath the apparent narrative of a child growing into an adult, there seems to be another layer of

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<sup>15</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> One example of Gordimer's growing metafictional concerns is the novel *My Son's Story* (1994). Homi Bhabha reads this novel as a significant text that explores the interstitial space and plays out the boundary effects in postcolonial discourse. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 18-22.

narrative that points to her growth back into childhood. The linear temporal framework in the establishment of a stable adult selfhood is disrupted by the irregularity and ambivalence embedded in the recurrent narrative of her body's experience as a child. 'No part of one's life can be said to come to an end except in death', as the end of the novel suggests, 'nothing can be said to be a beginning but birth, life flows and checks itself, overlaps, flows again' (p. 375). This flowing and overlapping of one's life between birth and death are intertwined with the constant overlapping of childhood and adulthood, of past and future. The following passage describes Helen's reactions towards her first kiss:

Then he bent to my face and lifted it with his own and kissed me, opening my tight pressing mouth, the child's hard kiss with which I tried to express my eagerness as a woman. . . I thought about it as something precious that had been shown to me; vivid, but withdrawn too quickly for me to be able to re-create every detail as my anxious memory willed. That anxious memory trembling eagerly to forget nothing; perhaps that is the beginning of desire, the end of a childhood? Wanting to remember becomes wanting; the recurring question that has no answer but its own eventual fading out into age, as it faded in from childhood. (pp. 57-8)

Following Helen's first sexual awakening, referenced at the beginning of this chapter, the kiss represents another significant transition from a child to a woman, which is also loaded with a strong sense of indeterminacy. The eagerness to become an adult is haunted by her lingering childhood—'the child's hard kiss with which I tried to express my eagerness as a woman'. The sense of ambiguity embedded in this process of transition and growing up is thus intensified by an ambiguous temporality, as the desire towards the future is intertwined with the desire towards the past—the eagerness of an 'anxious memory'. Under such ambiguous temporality, the spurious 'end of a childhood' becomes identical with an inability to remember and 'forget nothing'. The insufficiencies of memory, echoing the inability to convert from a child to a

woman, are again associated with the limitation of language and the inability to articulate. The 'recurring question' that cannot rise into words and has no answer, which besets and suspends every moment of Helen's rite of passage, also puts to question the very meaning of *Bildung* itself.

Jed Esty's perceptive study of modernist-era *Bildungsroman* set in colonial contact zones points out that the prevalent trope of frozen youth and stalled development disrupts the conventional ideology of progress in the discursive formation of self, nation, and empire at the turn of the twentieth century. The trope of 'unseasonable youth', as the title of his book suggests, encapsulates the contradictions between a rising colonial/imperial discourse and a historical-progressive temporality that has laid the foundation for the novel of development.<sup>17</sup> In an earlier study about conventional European *Bildungsroman*, Franco Moretti also places the trope of youth at the centre of this mode of writing and argues that the inherent mobility, dynamism, and contradiction of the youthful subject is the novelistic symbol for modernity. 'Only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence', as Moretti puts it, 'only thus, it seems, can modernity be *represented*'.<sup>18</sup> Both Esty's and Moretti's observations about the association between *Bildungsroman*, modernism, and modernity are highly relevant to Gordimer's writing as one of the epitomes of modernist and high-modernist prose practice in South African literary history. Aligning with the innovative spirit of modernist aesthetics, the suspension of *Bildung* in a novel like *The Lying Days* indicates Gordimer's disruption of a European literary tradition, critiquing especially its discordance in representing modernity and accommodating experiences and imaginings in the colonial space.

However, Gordimer's situatedness in the specificities of South African racial politics makes her innovations of *Bildungsroman* responsive to a peculiar

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<sup>17</sup> Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London; New York: Verso, 1987), p. 7.

historical and discursive context that inscribes an alternative modernity enmeshed in apartheid's racial relations. Firstly, the contradictions and bifurcations of modernity manifest themselves most prominently in apartheid South Africa and its official discourse, as modernity's promises for whites are based on the violent obstruction of blacks' access to it as well as their opportunity to be modern subjects. Another local specific historical situation that sheds light on the sociopolitical significance of Helen Shaw's *Bildung* in *The Lying Days* and informs the politics of Gordimer's early novels in general is the problematic intellectual legacy of liberalism. In the previous chapter, I have discussed the radical response towards this historical and ideological situation from black writers in the 1950s. In the following part of this chapter, I will analyze the politics of Gordimer's formal innovations as a white writer's response, whose exposure of the contradictions of colonial modernity in South Africa is simultaneously constructed in the complicity of her own European literary genealogy. My reading seeks to reveal the ways in which the deferral of the narrative establishment of an adult subject and the tendency to return to childhood in Gordimer's *Bildungsroman* bear witness to her ongoing ideological critique of liberalism and of the limitation of liberal ideals in the South African context.

### **Liberalism and the Liberal Novel**

The overall narrative pattern of *The Lying Days* was in accordance with the prevalent liberal humanist sentiments in the late 1940s and 50s, which attached primary significance to individual development and multi-racial personal contact in the face of social inequality and political oppression. The multi-racial cultural scene exemplified by Sophiatown Renaissance in this period was particularly associated with such widespread liberal sentiments. In spite of Gordimer's own indebtedness to the legacy of liberalism, elements of formal

critique in her debut novel, especially the suspension of the protagonist's *Bildung*, expressed its self-reflexive scepticism of the generic conventions and ideological doctrines governing its own making. In the few novels that followed *The Lying Days*, this immanent scepticism of liberal ideals gradually became more comprehensive examinations of liberalism in South Africa's political context. These novels offered critique of liberalism's underlying fallacies of paternalism and its complicity in white privilege, and eventually came to express disillusionment with liberalism as a means to engender effective political action. After *A World of Strangers* (1958) and *Occasion for Loving* (1963), *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) marked a watershed moment in Gordimer's writing because, as she put it, the novel emphatically 'show[ed] the breakdown of my belief in the liberal ideals'.<sup>19</sup>

Despite Gordimer's straightforward claim about her 'disillusionment' with liberalism in the late 1960s, the influence of liberalism in her work and in South Africa's intellectual history has been a complex and at times paradoxical issue.<sup>20</sup> While I will briefly discuss this issue here, it is, first of all, necessary to keep in mind the difference between liberalism as a body of doctrines perpetuated through political organizations and actions (in South Africa most notably represented by the Liberal Party), and liberalism as a developing and fluid intellectual resource that has given rise to varieties of imaginative and literary forms. Lionel Trilling made such a distinction about liberalism between its organizational and imaginative manifestations in *The Liberal Imagination* (1951). Addressing the political and intellectual situation in post-war, Cold-War America, Trilling proposed that literature had a unique relevance when it came to approaching the politics of liberalism, or politics itself in general, in a critical spirit. While literature recalled 'the primal imagination of liberalism' and 'its first imagination of variousness and possibility', as Trilling observed, literary

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<sup>19</sup> Johannes Riis, 'Nadine Gordimer', *Kunapipi*, 2 (1980), 20-6 (p. 20).

<sup>20</sup> For a recent discussion of the ambiguous legacy of liberalism and its relevance to contemporary South Africa, see Steven Friedman, 'The Ambiguous Legacy of Liberalism: Less a Theory of Society, More a State of Mind?', in *Intellectual Traditions in South Africa: Ideas, Individuals and Institutions*, ed. by Peter Vale and others (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014), pp. 29-50.

criticism had its unique critical edges against 'the organizational impulse' of liberalism and its particular manifestations of political practice.<sup>21</sup> Such a double vision of liberalism is also embedded in Gordimer's writing. In response to political liberalism, Gordimer showed her unflinching rejection, particularly after the failure of liberal organizations in the anti-apartheid struggle in the late 1960s. In an interview in 1974, she was quoted as saying, 'Liberal is a dirty word. Liberals are people who make promises they have no power to keep'.<sup>22</sup> To the broader sense of liberalism manifested in the imaginative category of the liberal novel, however, Gordimer's indebtedness and contribution were enduring.

Tony Morphet traces the development of the liberal novel in white South African writing as a fictional discourse in response to apartheid's discourse of racial division and alienation. He summarizes two major trajectories in this line of imaginative culture, one represented by Alan Paton, the other by Gordimer. Paton's liberal vision in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) posits a 'backward' movement—'a return to the premodern forms of relation' based on religious faith. Rejecting Paton's brand of liberalism, which has its underlying assumption of ethnocentrism and paternalism. Gordimer's writing on the contrary sets out a 'forward movement', which 'took her toward a belief in the reality, and the progressive character, of "history"' in forms of 'commitment of the self'.<sup>23</sup> These values of individual liberation and personal commitment inherited from liberalism stay unchanged throughout Gordimer's writing career. However, to return to Trilling's argument, the critical energies in this 'forward' pattern of the liberal novel are gathered not so much by political/organizational orientations as by the commitments of literature—by literature's particular strengths in playing out the complexities, ambiguities, contradictions, and limitations of various political agendas, including liberalism itself. Bearing in mind this liberal

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<sup>21</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Morphet, 'Stranger Fictions: Trajectories in the Liberal Novel', *World Literature Today*, 70 (1996), 53-58 (p. 54).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

trajectory in Gordimer's fictional discourse, I would add an observation that such 'forward movement' is often led by intergenerational interactions and by the transformative potential of the child.

Gordimer's paradoxical relationship with liberalism is perhaps most obviously foregrounded in *The Late Bourgeois World*. Its critique of political liberalism is related to the particular phase of liberation movements in the early 1960s. There were a series of acts of sabotage and armed insurrections happening within the few years after the Sharpeville Massacre: some conducted by Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, and some by an offshoot of the Liberal Party, the National Committee of Liberation (NCL) and later the African Resistance Movement (ARM). Because of their loose organization and lack of training and experience, these sabotage activities were soon suppressed by the apartheid government and came to a halt after the 1963 Rivonia Trial.<sup>24</sup> *The Late Bourgeois World* is based on the failure of this first wave of revolutionary attempts in the anti-apartheid struggle. Opening with the arrival of a telegram about the death of the protagonist Elizabeth's ex-husband Max van den Sandt, who is supposed to be understood by the reader as associated with the ARM, this novella concerns itself primarily with the fate and dead-end of political liberalism manifested in the failure of the ARM. Elizabeth, the first-person narrator, is the novelistic voice of the individual that critically examines the liberal consciousness embodied by her ex-husband Max, whose death is, as the novella reveals, mostly due to his 'naive, idealistic and romantic' conception of revolution.<sup>25</sup> As Elizabeth tries to come to terms with the meaning and reason of Max's suicide, she is also constantly facing an unknown future herself, questioning and exploring possible conditions for a new subject position in further political participation. As the quote from Franz Kafka in the novel's epigraph inquires (it also reappears twice in the novel), 'there are

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<sup>24</sup> See Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 90-6.

<sup>25</sup> For the historical association between the novel and the ARM, see Clingman, *History*, pp. 90-110.



possibilities for me; but under what stone do they lie?'.<sup>26</sup>

The underlying 'forward' movement, represented by the protagonist's open prospect for an unknown future, is foreshadowed early in the novel in her conversation with her son Bobo in his boarding school when she informs him of his father's death. While the mother grapples with finding proper explanations for Bobo about Max's death, the child's manner and reactions are unexpectedly composed and unperturbed by the news, as if, as the narrator puts it, 'he were the adult and I the child' (p. 22). In their conversation, Bobo mostly just nods his head 'with a curious kind of acceptance' (p. 22) or makes cursory statements without asking questions. For Elizabeth, Bobo is 'a person in his own right, complete, conjured up in himself' (p. 21); 'Bobo has mastered everything' (p. 24). For that matter, he seems to present possible danger to the adult: 'He'll tear me down. But with what? Of course I'd craftily like to find out, so that I can defend myself in advance, but one generation can never know the weapons of the next' (p. 27). Nevertheless, it is the unknowability of the next generation and 'the self-sufficiency of childhood' (p. 14), to use the narrator's phrase from early on in the novel, that drive her own life and propel her to change. The relationship between the possessive mother and the child is transformed into one in which the mother is somehow dependent on her son. 'I felt, as I sometimes do, an unreasonable confidence in Bobo. He is all right. He will be all right. In spite of everything' (p. 30). Later in the novel, it is also Bobo's words—'I'm sorry I didn't love him [Max]'—that push Elizabeth to question her marriage with Max, their purported 'love' relationship, and symbolically her relationship with the ideology of liberalism (p. 81).

*The Late Bourgeois World* indeed illustrates the narrative tendency of a 'forward' movement because it places its chief emphasis on the future and passes its hope for change on the next generation. As Elizabeth eventually decides to deposit money for the underground resistance movement (the novel

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<sup>26</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p. 74, 91. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

does not state her decision about political commitment for sure, but it indicates that such an action is likely), the novel projects its political vision onto a revolutionary future. Its title is also suggestive of such an orientation towards an emerging transformation after the failure of liberalism. Taken from the formulation by an East German writer, 'the late bourgeois world' exists, as Elizabeth's lover Graham tells her, 'in relation to the early Communist world' (p. 114). Such diagnosis of a historical condition also foresees Gordimer's own growing intellectual engagement with radical politics and Marxist cultural criticism in her following work. While this 'forward' vision driven towards an unknown future still persists in her novels, she begins also to explore the ways in which such an unknown future is intertwined with contingencies of the past and the ways in which such temporality casts its effects on individual subjects in times of revolution. As Clingman points out, *Burger's Daughter*, which was published in 1979, is the first of Gordimer's novels that presents 'history as a sense of the past'.<sup>27</sup> In the following part of this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the child is embedded in Gordimer's novelistic engagement with memory and temporality, which is foreshadowed in *The Lying Days*, but comes to the fore in her novelistic aesthetics and political critique in the late 1970s and early 80s.

### **Marxist Cultural Politics and *Burger's Daughter***

Disillusionment with liberalism in the late 1960s and 70s saw Gordimer's increasing endorsement of Leftist politics and her growing belief in the necessity of the revolutionary removal of the apartheid state. The Black Consciousness Movement also partly prompted her to change from liberal to radical politics. Rejecting the paternalistic assumptions of liberal ideology as complicit in the structure of white privilege, the Black Consciousness Movement

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<sup>27</sup> Clingman, *History*, p. 171.

called forth an autonomous political and cultural identity of blacks at the expense of excluding help from all whites. As Gordimer paraphrased the poet Mongane Wally Serote's famous lines, 'blacks must learn to talk; whites must learn must listen'.<sup>28</sup> Gordimer's response to this was twofold. She indeed 'listened', as her writing afterwards began to show more critical attention to and influence from black literary traditions and African literary culture. At the same time, she also sought new ideological grounds for autonomous participation in the anti-apartheid struggle as a white writer—by finding recourse to Marxist cultural theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Fischer, and, most importantly, Georg Lukács.

Although Gordimer showed her adamant political position as a 'radical' particularly after the Soweto Uprising in 1976, she never fully adhered to any ideological or political doctrines, including Lukácsian Marxist cultural politics. Head maintains that, although the influence of the Lukácsian taxonomy of realism is obvious in many of Gordimer's critical and fictional writing, one should not ignore Gordimer's own appropriation and complication of Lukácsian precepts.<sup>29</sup> A significant divergence between Gordimer and Lukács, as Head points out, is the treatment of narrative relativity associated with modernist fiction. Lukács, in his essay 'Narrate or Describe?' (1936), makes the distinction between the novelistic principles of the realists such as Walter Scott, Balzac, and Tolstoy, and the naturalists represented by Zola and Flaubert. Attaching aesthetic superiority to the former, Lukács argues that the realists adhere to the principle of narration, which partakes of historical impetus and reveals the 'general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives'. The naturalists, in contrast, rely chiefly on descriptions and observations, turning historical events into 'a series of tableaux'.<sup>30</sup> For Lukács, to maintain the presence of a historical dimension realized in the form of narration rather

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<sup>28</sup> This is Gordimer's paraphrase from Serote's 1972 poem 'Ofay-watcher, Throbs Phase'. See Gordimer, *Essential Gesture*, p. 267.

<sup>29</sup> Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), p. 116.

than description, the novel needs to adopt a cohesive ideological orientation of the narrating agent. Under such principles, Lukács dismisses the relativism and fragmentation of modernist narrative as undermining the totality of the historical dimension and the ideological orientation that he sees as the kernel of the novel. As Head points out, Gordimer's work not only benefits from the Lukácsian ideological orientation but also learns much from modernist narrative techniques. It is through the combination of an ideological orientation and the modernist 'extension of narrative possibilities' that Gordimer's novels are able to convey 'the complexity of the historical situation' in South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

*Burger's Daughter* attests to Gordimer's own appropriation of Lukács's theory to the South African situation. Inspired by the life of the anti-apartheid activist, the Afrikaner Communist Party member Bram Fischer, and his family, *Burger's Daughter* portrays its protagonist Rosa Burger as the child of a steadfastly ideologically oriented family. Born to Afrikaner Communist parents and named after Rosa Luxemburg, Rosa's life is imbued from the start with the political ideology to which her parents have devoutly committed themselves. She herself becomes the ideological symbol of a Communist revolutionary, whose life runs parallel to some of the significant political events in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. She is born in May 1948, as the Afrikaner nationalist government comes to power and institutes formal apartheid. Her first menstruation happens outside the prison house when she is visiting her detained mother after the Treason Trial. Her marriage is for the sake of exchanging political messages in and out of the prison. Nevertheless, the novel's portrayal of Rosa's *Bildung*, rather than being driven by Marxist political and ideological commitments, is intertwined with the questioning of their validity through the formal fragmentation and dissolution of Rosa's coherent selfhood. There are significant formal and thematic features about Rosa's *Bildung* in *Burger's Daughter* that are already foregrounded in *The Lying Days*. The fragmentation of Rosa Burger's pre-established subject position is

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<sup>31</sup> Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, p. 16.

entangled, like Helen Shaw's, in the ongoing negotiation between language and the body and, to use Gordimer's own formulation in an earlier essay, between the 'abstractions of politics' and 'the flesh and blood of individual behavior'.<sup>32</sup> Following the political orientation dictated to her, there is a given logic to Rosa's existence where a political meaning always precedes and dominates her actions, emotions and memories. Her life is as much symbolic as given and told before it is real and voluntary. Such logic, however, is constantly disrupted and transformed by Rosa's own experiential body. The novel thus delineates Rosa's *Bildung* in the conflict, oscillation, and the eventual symbiosis between the meaning of a life, assigned to her through the interpellation of varieties of political orientations and epistemological systems, and a fragmented sense of selfhood attained through her corporeal experience.

Gordimer's novelistic art, which welds together Lukácsian realism and modernist ambiguity, is relevant not only to South Africa's historical situation but also to the global political situation: the dilemma of Western Leftist intellectuals emerging from the late 1970s and early 80s, who have also been her important audience and interlocutors. One should bear in mind that the writing of *Burger's Daughter* at that time bore witness to the socialist democratic promises of Communism having given way to new forms of autocracy and tyranny. Towards the end of 'Living in the Interregnum', Gordimer articulated her own position while facing the dilemma that such a global historical situation entailed. Drawing on Susan Sontag, she made a comparison between her own consternation and that of the American Left—a dilemma in the 'interregnum' of not being able to offer a way out between the failures of the Communist regimes and the evils of Western capitalism. Being clearly aware of this situation, Gordimer, nevertheless, believed that the American Left 'needs to muster with the democratic left of the third world [...] the cosmic obstinacy to believe in and work toward the possibility of an

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<sup>32</sup> *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St. James Press, 1972), p. 501.

alternative left'.<sup>33</sup> Reading such a global political situation as reflecting back on *Burger's Daughter*, we can say that the novel contains as much Gordimer's endorsement of radical politics in the anti-apartheid struggle as her conveyance of a cautionary message against the dangers of political dogmatism that has given rise to Communist tyranny—a historical situation that Lukács could not have foreseen. Rosa's *Bildung* thus can be read as Gordimer's novelistic exploration of the 'possibility of an alternative left'—an overall ideological stance of the left that needs to be perpetually and self-reflexively critiqued and transformed through the constant intervention of the logic of the experiential body, which somehow mirrors the logic of literary discourse itself. This process of literature's political intervention, in a similar vein to the suspension of Helen's *Bildung* in *The Lying Days*, is to be found in Rosa's *Bildung* in the insufficiencies of memory, which invents childhood as a significant site of continuous possibility and change.

Compared with the linear temporal frame in *The Lying Days*, *Burger's Daughter* radically disrupts the realist biographical narrative structure in a conventional *Bildungsroman*. The novel follows, at one level, a simple plot in which Rosa Burger searches for selfhood after her father's death: she travels to Europe, trying to steer her life away from politics, but eventually returns to South Africa to recommit herself to the struggle against the apartheid state. Interspersed within this plot, though, is a heteroglossic exploration into her life, characterized by the coexistence of multifarious narrative forms and perspectives (first-person internal monologues, third-person omniscient narratives, newspaper reports, public speeches, and political pamphlets). While the recollection of childhood in this novel does hinge on the body's experience as a vehicle through which ideological confines are disrupted, it at the same time in rather explicit ways addresses the body itself as inseparable from epistemological and ideological constructions. Such a dialectical exploration into the body in relation to childhood memory is dramatized in two significant

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<sup>33</sup> 'Interregnum', p. 25.

relationships in Rosa's life: one with her bohemian and apolitical lover Conrad, and the other with her black foster-brother Baasie.

Conrad appears early in the novel, when Rosa is struggling to withdraw herself from the political circle of her parents after her father Lionel Burger's death. Having studied Italian literature and travelled widely around the world, Conrad and his love affair with Rosa provide her with an alternative from the political household she grows up in. To Rosa and her political family, Conrad is someone 'who had had no importance in their life, someone who stood quite outside it, peripheral'.<sup>34</sup> In opposition to Rosa's parents' political commitments, Conrad's demeanor and mindset seem to remain isolated from the political realities in South Africa. Rosa's contrast with Conrad and her romantic contact with him after her father's death reveal an attempt not only to withdraw from political actions but also to step beyond the confines of an ideologically constructed subjectivity she has inherited from her Communist parents. While she strives to look for an apolitical alternative self, which is projected onto her desire for Conrad, she eventually discovers that such an apolitical realm exists as another system of knowledge that has its own boundaries. The conflict between Rosa who has 'grown up entirely through other people' (p. 46) and Conrad as a purely experiential individual is staged in their discussion about Rosa's childhood memory of the events happening around the 1960 Sharpeville massacre.

Rosa gives an account of the turmoil inside her house when her parents were attending the victims of the killings at Sharpeville. Presented in direct quotation, Rosa's narrative of her experience as a twelve-year-old consists in an inconsistent assemblage of incidents and impressions:

Lionel found out they'd been shot in the back. I asked my mother and she explained...but I didn't understand what it meant, the difference if you were hit in the back or chest. [...] I'd imagined (from cowboy films?) a bullet went right through you and there would be two holes...both the

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<sup>34</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p. 17. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

same...but when I heard my father asking him so many questions, then I understood that what mattered was you could see which side and from which level a bullet came. Lionel had ways of getting in touch with people who worked at the hospital where the wounded had been taken—the press wasn't allowed near. I woke up very late at night, it must have been three in the morning when he came back and everyone was with my mother in our dining room, I remember the dishes still on the table, she'd made food for people. They didn't go to bed at all. The ANC leaders were there, and the lawyers, Gifford Williams and someone else—it was urgent to go out and get sworn statements from witnesses so that if there was going to be an inquiry what really happened would come out, it wouldn't just be a State cover-up...PAC people—Tsolo and his men were the ones who'd actually organized that particular protest against passes at the Sharpeville police station, but that didn't matter, what happened had gone far beyond political rivalry. [...] Lily gave me a tray of coffee to take to them, and they'd forgotten to turn off the lights in the daylight--The sort of thing that sticks in your mind when you're a child... (pp. 43-44)

The language Rosa uses to recollect her childhood experience is made up of various discourses, in which it is impossible to separate the experience of the child from her voice as an adult. Personal accounts of familial and domestic matters between children and parents (a child's query about the bullet) are mingled with factual statements ('Lionel had ways of getting in touch with people who worked at the hospital'). Sensory memory (lights in the daylight) is in parallel with political terminology (sworn statements, witnesses, state cover-up, ANC leaders, political rivalry and so on). This heteroglossic narrative of memory, among other things, makes no distinction between political and ideological language and the experiential senses of the body. The historical context of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre is enmeshed in Rosa's account of her individual experience of it as a child. Just as she attempts to shun her parents' circle of political activists, in her childhood recollection she seems to struggle towards an ahistorical and apolitical register of experience ('the sort of thing that sticks in your mind when you're a child'), only to find that her very personal account of memory has to be bracketed in its political context and embedded in the political language with which the representation of her



memory is inextricably bound up.

In contrast to Rosa's narrative of childhood memory shot through with political language, Conrad, who 'was at ease in the streets as children or black men', gives an opposite version of childhood memory in which 'political events couldn't ever have existed' (pp. 43-44). The underlying challenge Conrad keeps posing to Rosa is the way in which her political awareness always dominates her narrative, and therefore her selfhood always lacks the dimension of the body and its senses. For Conrad, the problem with Rosa's childhood recollection is its very political underpinnings. 'Some blacks shot in the back', as Conrad points out, 'It's something that changed the look of everything' (p. 44). On the contrary, Conrad's own childhood memory is about the discovery of his mother's extramarital affair, his own Oedipal impulse, his body's responses to a second's contact with the electrical point in the house, and his innermost death drive (pp. 44-46). He accuses Rosa of living a life in 'rationality, extraversion [...] just words; life isn't there', whereas his own life and memory tells the 'truth about what matters [...] sex and death. Everything else is ducking away' (pp. 46-7). What Conrad has ignited in Rosa, through the sensual experience they share, is both the idea of the individual body and the restoration of a childhood situated in personal experience—a significant vehicle through which Conrad 'come[s] to reaching the realities' (p. 47). The bifurcation between Rosa and Conrad and their distinctive versions of childhood memory stage the key theme running throughout Rosa's *Bildung*. Their conflict over the representation of childhood memory stands for the contest between the realm of political abstraction—'just words'—and the realm of individual experience. But more importantly, it also stages the contest between two ideologies and two epistemological systems: Marxism and psychoanalysis.

Conrad speaks for the psychoanalytic model (a sweeping and biased understanding of it) of the individual self and the individual body (he briefly mentions Jung's book to Rosa) that precedes collective and ideological

categorizations.<sup>35</sup> The accusation he raises against Rosa's Marxist ideology is the tendency of its overarching framework to subsume private, individual life under abstract social formulations. 'Fantasies, obsessions', as Conrad says, are 'the real reasons why you won't kill and perhaps why you can go on living. Saint-Simon and Fourier and Marx and Lenin and Luxemburg whose namesake you are—you can't get that from them' (p. 47). He believes in the notion of an autonomous selfhood as that 'the will is my own. The emotion's my own. The right to be inconsolable. When I feel, there's no "we", only "I"' (p. 52). While Rosa's epistemological system stands for a hierarchical order where collectivity masks and prevails over the body, Conrad's approaches to the world is the reversal of such an order where the individual body, its expression of desires, supersedes social collectivity.

Rosa's own responses to Conrad's evocation of her childhood memory and their conflictual views are one of the central themes governing the first part of the novel, especially in Rosa's recurrent internal monologues addressed to Conrad. While Rosa increasingly comes to realize that her own life in her parents' house has been constructed in 'words, nothing but dead words, abstractions', she also begins to question the alternative apolitical realm of selfhood that Conrad offers to her (p. 142). Not only does she begin to express doubt about the absolutism of Conrad's ideas and the validity of the existence of a communicable experience of the individual body as separate from social discourses and ideological constructs, she also gradually becomes critical of the problematic insularity of the bourgeois individualism that Conrad represents. Through the discovery of her own bodily experience, it becomes clear to her that 'the real definition of loneliness was to live without social responsibility' (p. 73), and that 'at twelve years old what happened at Sharpeville was as immediate to me as what was happening in my own body' (p. 115). Her eventual renunciation of the validity of Conrad's worldview is intertwined with her own

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<sup>35</sup> Judie Newman gives a psychoanalytic reading of the novel through theories of Fanon and Mannoni, whose writing have also influenced Gordimer's own. See Judie Newman, 'Prospero's Complex: Race and Sex in *Burger's Daughter*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 20 (1985), 91-9.

reconstruction of another significant childhood memory, about her relationship with Baasie (meaning 'little master')—a black foster-child Rosa's father had taken into their house—and the eventual termination of their friendship after a fierce argument over the phone in London near the end of the novel. This is how Rosa remembers her argument with Conrad in the tree-house at the back of her home, which is also the place where she and Baasie used to play children's games.

I left the children's tree-house we were living in, in an intimacy of self-engrossment without the reserve of adult accountability, accepting each other's encroachments as the law of the litter, treating each other's dirt as our own, as little Baasie and I had long ago performed the child's black mass, tasting on a finger the gall of our own shit and the saline of our own pee. (p. 70)

Rosa's relationships with Conrad and Baasie, both preserved in the children's tree-house, have a strong implication of the body's intimacy—sexual experience and the 'child's black mass', both conducted 'without the reserve of adult accountability'. Such physical intimacy, represented as 'the law of the litter', of 'dirt', and of bodily excretions, seems to oppose the law of adulthood, of order, and of the abstractions of politics. To a certain extent, this seems to echo the logic in Helen Shaw's *Bildung in the Lying Days*, in which affirmation of the body is constantly pitched against the dominance of 'names' and language. Nevertheless, *Burger's Daughter* substantially complicates this notion of the body itself and the epistemological and political context of its existence. Despite the lyrical and romantic tone underlying Rosa's internal monologue addressed to Conrad, such intimacy of the body, closely associated with her ongoing recollection of childhood, is represented as unstable in itself and is invested also with a strong sense of irony. Rosa's romance with Conrad is non-committal and short-lived. They never meet each other again in real life after their argument about childhood in the tree-house, and Rosa's attitude towards him and the

bourgeois mindset he represents likewise become increasingly ironic and critical. As she says,

Although you and I huddled for warmth in the same bed, I never minded you making love to the girl who taught Spanish. And you know we had stopped making love together months before I left, aware that it had become incest. (p. 70)

Because my boss Barry Eckhard and your successful scrap-dealer father proposed to you their fate, the bourgeois fate, alternate to Lionel's: to eat without hunger, mate without desire. (p. 117)

The intimacy between Rosa and Conrad has projected onto Rosa's life an imaginative dimension of the experiential body as an escape from the confines of the political beliefs she is inculcated into, yet the fleeting existence of such intimacy has also exposed the tendency of an egocentric bourgeois mindset to flee from social responsibilities and by implication to maintain white privilege in South Africa. As Rosa keeps questioning the implications of her desire for Conrad's life, she also comes to realize Conrad's concept of the 'apolitical' body as fictional and illusory when confronted by the historical realities in South Africa.

This exposure of the problems of childhood intimacy is also revealed in Rosa's failed relationship with Baasie, which mirrors the historical condition engendered by the separatist discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement. Rosa and Baasie have lost contact since Lionel Burger's death and resume connection in a phone call after coming across each other without actually talking at a party in London. The subsequent quarrel between them makes Rosa realize that her idealistic memory of their childhood connection—"their infant intimacy" as she calls it—is never real. She doesn't even know Baasie's real name (though we learn that it is Zwelinzima Vulindlela, meaning 'suffering land'), and for that matter she 'uses no name because she has no name for him' (p. 319). Baasie shows little appreciation for the political resistance of white

people to which Rosa's parents devote themselves, telling Rosa that 'there're dozens of our fathers sick and dying like dogs [...] killed in prison. It's nothing. I know plenty blacks like Burger. It's nothing' (p. 320). He also straightforwardly claims the schism between his life and Rosa's by rejecting her attempts to resume friendship with him. As he says to her, 'I don't know who you are. [...] I don't have to tell you what I'm doing' (p. 322). This drastic change of the relationship between Rosa and her black foster-brother also bears witness to the failure of liberal humanist ideals, which rely on multiracial personal contact to provide a solution to the social problems that apartheid has created. Baasie's reaction towards Rosa also reflects, as I have mentioned earlier, response to the failure of such liberal ideals from the Black Consciousness Movement. As Rosa recalls the idealistic harmony enshrined in the house of a white family like the Burgers,

Lionel—my mother and father—people in that house, had a connection with blacks that was completely personal. [...] I have lost connection. It's only the memory of childhood warmth for me. (p. 172)

Here the paternalistic assumption of liberalism, which aims to offer to black people a space and metaphorically an Eurocentric modern subjectivity that are not theirs in the first place, only turns out to be a piece of childhood experience irretrievably lost. Gordimer's critique of liberalism in *The Late Bourgeois World*, which is activated by the vision for an unknown future, reappears in *Burger's Daughter*, but becomes primarily bound up with the instability of memory, the irretrievable loss of the past, and the exposure of the romanticist illusion of childhood experience.

These moments of disillusionment with 'infant intimacy', which symbolize Gordimer's continual exposure of the failure of liberalist belief in the power of personal contact across apartheid's colour bar, also appear in her other writing in this period. For example, in the short story 'Town and Country Lovers', first

published in 1980, Gordimer depicts the failed relationship between a white farmer's son, Paulus Eysendyck, and a black girl, Thebedi, who used to work on the farm. As their close childhood friendship has developed into a secret romance, Thebedi gives birth to Paulus's son after getting married to a black man Njabulo. After the mysterious death of the baby after Paulus's visit to the farm, Thebedi charges him for poisoning and murdering the baby, but loses the case due to lack of evidence. In a newspaper report of the case, under a photo of Thebedi, she is quoted as saying, 'it was a thing of our childhood, we don't see each other any more'.<sup>36</sup> Such exposure of the failure of 'the thing of our childhood' reveals Gordimer's critique of the romanticist tendency of liberal ideals to attach primary value to personal contact in the face of graver situations of structural and economic inequality under the authoritarian power of the apartheid state.

The exposure of the romanticist ideals of childhood intimacy as an operative critique of liberalist belief systems also appear in a short episode in her 1981 novel *July's People*, in which the protagonist Maureen Smales recollects her relationship with her black nanny/ house servant Lydia when she was a child, via a photograph that captures the particular moment of she and Lydia crossing the road together. The closeness between a white child and her black nanny is evoked again in their physical contact—the act of holding hands. 'When the black woman makes the move against the traffic light suddenly gone red', as the adult Maureen describes the photograph, 'the white girl grabs her hand to stop her, and they continue to hold hands, loosely and easily, while waiting for the light to change.'<sup>37</sup> However, such physical closeness is immediately questioned by the adult Maureen's vague awareness of the racial difference and inequality between Lydia and herself as a white child in apartheid South Africa. As she asks, 'why had Lydia carried her case? Did the photographer know what he saw, when they crossed the road like that, together?

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<sup>36</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (London: Cape, 1980), p. 93

<sup>37</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), p. 30.

Did the book, placing the pair in its context, give the reason she and Lydia, in their affection and ignorance, didn't know?'.<sup>38</sup>

The contingencies of Maureen's childhood memory are related to some of the crucial issues raised by my analysis of the child in *Burger's Daughter* and *The Lying Days*. First of all, the series of questions that Maureen asks are primarily directed towards limitations of knowledge, and are concerned with the tension between ignorance and modes of knowing in the interrogation of white consciousness. Beyond their affection evoked by the body and close physical contact, the child's 'ignorance', reverberating with the white photographer's ignorance of what he sees (or what he cannot see), in fact exposes the ignorance of white consciousness in terms of their knowledge of black people. Maureen's ignorance of Lydia's experience, staged in the contingencies of her memory, is also closely associated with the material medium that initiates and encapsulates such memory: the book and the photography. In accordance with the instability of memory and childhood, the unstable meanings that can be attached to materials also serve as a significant vehicle of critique of white privilege.<sup>39</sup>

Evoked by her childhood memory, the protagonist and focalizer Maureen's awareness of the limits of her knowledge ('why had Lydia carried her case?') is situated in the novel's complex exploration into the institutional, psychological, and economic bases of racial inequality in South Africa. After Black Consciousness and Soweto Uprising, and following the independence of Mozambique and Angola in 1975, the anti-apartheid struggle was gathering new momentum for a more united revolutionary endeavour. 'If the image of Rosa Burger in solitary confinement stands as a striking symbol of the alienated

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> Representations of objects and materials, and materialist critique of language and ideology are crucial in *July's People*. See Judie Newman, 'July's People', in Nadine Gordimer (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 85-92. For a specific discussion of photography, see Laura Wright, 'National Photographic: Images of Sensibility and the Nation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 38 (2005), 75-92. For a wider discussion of the novel's engagement in the material condition of various forms of cultural production as well as the novel's own material life and its global reception, see Andrew van der Vlies, 'July's People in Context: Apartheid's Dystopias Abroad', in Brendon Nicholls, *Nadine Gordimer's July's People* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 115-29.

condition of a dissident white consciousness in the aftermath of Soweto', as Clingman observes, 'then in the years after *Burger's Daughter* was published it seems that Nadine Gordimer too was seeking for some kind of revival and re-engagement'.<sup>40</sup> *July's People* bears witness to this attempt to seek re-engagement by imagining a dystopian future, when the Smales family are driven out of their home and forced to live under the shelter of their former servant July's homestead. Although the story happens in the midst of revolution, the novel in fact is envisioning a post-revolutionary world in which the economic and material bases of white privilege are fundamentally subverted. Mirroring the narrative trajectory of the female protagonists' transformations in *The Lying Days*, *The Late Bourgeois World*, and, to a lesser extent, *Burger's Daughter*, the white female liberal protagonist Maureen also undergoes a transformation while facing the radical changes of her material conditions. As Maureen grows up on the mines in the Transvaal, the biographical similarity between her and Helen Shaw may allow us to read *July's People* as a 'sequel' to *The Lying Days*. Besides, allusion to fairy tales, as Brendon Nicholls points out, is also one of the key motifs in Maureen's shifting perception of her world.<sup>41</sup>

A significant feature in *July's People* that corresponds to its reflections on its historical present is the foregrounding of the issue of time itself. As its famous epigraph from Antonio Gramsci suggests, 'the old is dying, the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms'.<sup>42</sup> The rejection of a linear historical totality and the in-betweenness and open-endedness of the past and the future are captured particularly by the novel's depiction of the child. The possibilities of an unknown future embodied by Bobo in *The Late Bourgeois World* and the contingencies of the past evoked in Rosa's childhood memory in *Burger's Daughter* are juxtaposed in *July's People*. Maureen's engagement with her childhood parallels the novel's depiction of three of her own children, who in one way or another show their nascent

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<sup>40</sup> Clingman, *History*, p.194.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholls, *Nadine Gordimer's July's People*, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Gordimer, *July's People*.



adaptability to July's community.<sup>43</sup> Embodied by the child, this alternative temporality of the 'interregnum' is perhaps one of Gordimer's most widely influential conceptual formulations in her ongoing critique of South Africa's political, historical, and ideological conditions. While such a formulation has its lineage from her early aesthetic innovations in *The Lying Days* and her political and ideological critique of liberalism and Marxism, its critical energies continue to gain momentum till the present day and still have great relevance to post-apartheid South African writing.

### **Childhood and National Identity**

The issue of national identity is crucial to Gordimer's novelistic exploration of a historical consciousness constructed in the limitations of knowledge and the ambiguities of political commitments. Her consistent resolution in writing herself onto the ideological map of South African and African literary culture, bearing all forms of productive contradictions and shifting positions, also finds powerful expression in the trope of childhood. This is more obvious in her critical essays than narrative prose work. In one of her earliest published essays, 'A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape' (1954), she associated her autobiographical account of childhood with her initial sense of a national identity.

I suppose it is a pity that as children we did not know what people like to talk of as 'the real Africa'--the Africa of proud black warriors and great jungle rivers and enormous silent nights, that anachronism of a country belonging to its own birds and beasts and savages which rouses such nostalgia in the citified, neighbor-jostled heart, and out of which a mystique has been created by writers and film directors. [...] But the *real* South Africa was then, and is now, to be found in Johannesburg and in the brash, thriving towns of the Witwatersrand. Everything that is happening on the whole emergent continent can be found in the

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<sup>43</sup> For Clingman's discussion of this motif of the Smales' children, see Clingman, *History*, pp.193-204.

microcosm here. [...] A sad, confusing part of the world to grow up and live in. And yet exciting.<sup>44</sup>

The sense of 'reality' embedded in her own experience of childhood is pitched against the 'anachronism' and 'mystique [...] created by writers and film directors'. Gordimer's imagining of childhood as the 'microcosm' of 'the real Africa' and 'the real South Africa' offers a critique of the colonialist and romanticized perception of the African landscape as consisting of 'proud black warriors and great jungle rivers and enormous silent nights [...] birds and beasts and savages'. Published around the same period as *The Lying Days*, her autobiographical account of childhood and her claim of a national identity in this article were quite straightforward. There were, however, aspects in this vision of a national identity that were to be taken up with more complexity in later stages of her writing: one was the inseparability between South Africa and 'the whole emergent continent', and the other was the article's intended American audience (it was published in *The New Yorker*) and therefore her writing's situatedness in a Western literary culture at large.

As I have mentioned, the 1970s marked an important period of transformation in Gordimer's writing. Her anti-apartheid stance largely informed by liberalism, and the formulation of her 'South Africanness' as confidently directed towards a Western audience in 'A South African Childhood' were challenged by the intensifying political struggle within South Africa and the exclusionary voice of Black Consciousness discourse. Her critical essays and literary activities in this period all bore witness to her active readjustment of a national and literary identity. In an address at the University of Cape Town in 1977 titled 'What Being a South African Means to Me', she once again returned to childhood as a primary source of inspiration in the refashioning of her national identity as a white writer. She reiterated that childhood experience was the root of her association with South Africa. Believing that 'the shock of

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<sup>44</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape', *New Yorker*, 15 October 1954, p.121.

confrontation with the physical world [...] put[s] a certain stamp on your perception and interpretation of the world', she attributed her sense of being to the confrontation with the South African landscape as a child. It was 'not a romantic vision', she emphasized, but 'many questions to which I shall die while still working out my answers began there'.<sup>45</sup>

One of the important questions to which Gordimer had been striving to seek answers during this period was how to negotiate European literary traditions, which had been her own predominant literary inheritance, and the unique African experience that her writing also sought to incorporate and reflect. In publications like *The Black Interpreters* (1973) and 'English Language Literature and Politics in South Africa' (1976), Gordimer substantiated her reformulation of a national literary culture by incorporating her appraisal of the values and pitfalls of black writing in South Africa, and her appreciation of African writers and an African literary tradition.<sup>46</sup> In her 1982 review of Wole Soyinka's autobiography *Ake: Years of Childhood*, the paradox embedded in adjusting her own identity found resonance in her understanding of Soyinka's account of childhood. The following passages were the beginning and ending of the article titled 'The Child is the Man':

As autobiographer of childhood the African writer has an advantage as special as, if very different from, that of Proust. His sense of self is *au fond* his Africanness. Adult experience as poet, novelist, playwright, often exile, is mingled with other countries, languages, cultures from which his colour always distinguishes him. Childhood belongs to African experience and it is not over; it remains with him forever in his blackness, an essential identity never superseded by any other. [...] The old adage is paraphrased—one's pleasure in the autobiography lies in the fact that the child is not only father to the exceptional man, but still is the man.

The writer finds his way to him with a felicity of evocation and

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<sup>45</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'What Being a South African Means to Me', *South African Outlook*, June 1997, pp. 87-9.

<sup>46</sup> See Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 5-11.

expression on the 'axis of tastes and smells' along with the preparation of foods provides a family genealogy, a wonderfully sensuous *first* sense of self, other and belonging. [...] Just as the visitors and supplicants to HM's yard [...] remind one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's father's court in the Polish ghetto, so the patterns of living perceived through the tastebuds evoke Gunter Grass's culinary interpretation of Europe's disasters and survivals. The pleasures of entering Wole Soyinka's childhood, for a stranger, consist not only in differences but in correspondences as well.<sup>47</sup>

Embedded in the logic of politics and the body, childhood is a powerful trope that contains the contradictory forces that are dominant in Gordimer's writing during this long historical period. On the one hand, she sees the child as emblematic of an 'essential identity'—Soyinka's 'blackness' and his 'Africanness'. On the other hand, the sensuous experience—the axis of tastes and smells—that childhood evokes, also reveals the disruptive force that may potentially transform such essentialist formulations. This tension is also mobilized in the global geopolitical order between the national and the transnational. While Soyinka's African experience is different from the high European experience of Proust, it finds correspondence in a Jewish Eastern European writer like Isaac Bashevis Singer and a German Leftist writer like Günter Grass. Gordimer never seems to have developed a coherent 'theory' or synthesis in terms of the ethical as well as political dilemma she has faced as a white South African writer—how to speak to, for, or as the other without always already reflecting a position of paternalistic privilege. Nevertheless, it is in constantly attending to this dilemma, in many cases, as this chapter reveals, by identifying herself or her novelistic personas with the child, that she is able to face the shifting and very often uncomfortable historical moments that her diverse writing addresses.

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<sup>47</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Child Is the Man', *New York Review of Books*, 21 October 1982.

## Chapter 3

### **Irony Voices, Ambiguous Histories: Writing the Child through Transition**

In the introduction to a special issue of *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, published in 2000, on South African fiction after apartheid, David Attwell and Barbara Harlow cautioned against the tendency to see the monumental events of the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the first democratic election in 1994 as miraculous. Arguing that ‘ambiguity seems to be the distinguishing feature’ of the first decade since the release of Mandela, they observed at that time that post-apartheid literature had ‘taken upon itself the task of articulating [...] the experiential, ethical, and political ambiguities of the transition’, which offered strong proof for the ways in which ‘the liberalism of the new order is more accommodating than a revolutionary culture could ever be, to the re-invention of tradition, to irony, to play’.<sup>1</sup> However, the condition of ambiguity that Attwell and Harlow attributed to the transitional decade in 2000 seems to have stretched far beyond those years: indeed, ‘transition’ itself has become an ambiguous term to indicate any possible, foreseeable futures towards which South African society is heading. Andrew van der Vlies describes this prolonged condition of ambiguity in South African writing since apartheid ended through the lens of temporality and affect. Referring retrospectively to Gordimer’s famous appropriation of Gramsci’s formulation ‘interregnum’, Van der Vlies observes that contemporary South African literature addresses this historical

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<sup>1</sup> David Attwell and Barbara Harlow, ‘Introduction: South African Fiction after Apartheid’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 46(2000), 1-9 (p. 4).

situation by representing time and the present repeatedly as having the status of stasis and impasse, accompanied by varieties of disaffection.<sup>2</sup>

While 'transition' seems no longer to be a viable label to designate any distinctive historical or literary features in post-apartheid society, the so-called 'transitional decade' after the release of Mandela did witness some major transformations in literary writing that represented ambiguity in new themes and aesthetic forms. One event that had crucial effects on these changes was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Since it began to take public hearings in 1996, the TRC, in its recuperation of individual narratives to work through collective trauma and to reconstruct national identities, has been a significant source of reference for writers and literary scholars alike. Its public hearings have been directly represented in numerous literary works, such as Antjie Krog's realistic and quasi-documentary reference in *Country of My Skull* (1998) and Gillian Slovo's fictional account in *Red Dust* (2000). More importantly, the common narrative nature of literary accounts and TRC testimonies bridges the gap between private preoccupations and public ethics and between individual and collective memories, shaping and altering significantly the ways in which individual stories in literary works are written and read in a broader sociopolitical, ethical, and legal context.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will focus on representations of the child in one particular genre emerging from the transitional decade: white confessional writing, in which white writers use the autobiographical form or *Bildungsroman* to negotiate white subjectivities through changes from the old dispensation towards the new. Sarah Nuttall points out that narratives of the self by whites

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Notable commentaries and studies about the interconnectedness between the TRC and South Africa's literary culture include the collection of essays in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). For a thorough contextualization and discussion of the ways in which literary and cultural criticism addresses the issue of narrativizing the past in relation to the TRC, see Andrew van der Vlies, 'On the Ambiguities of Narrative and History: Writing (about) the Past in Recent South African Literary Criticism', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34 (2008), 949-61. A recent study is Shane Graham, *South African Literature after the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

from the mid-1990s onward mark ‘a major shift in the ways in which whiteness began to be looked at as the embeddedness of race in the legal and political fabric of South Africa began to crack’.<sup>4</sup> Using the concept of ‘entanglement’, Nuttall describes white self-narratives from this period as generally illustrating ‘a process of becoming someone you were not in the beginning’. ‘The work of entanglement is also, in part, the work of disentanglement’, as Nuttall puts it, ‘from whiteness in its official fictions and material trajectories, its privileges and access to power, now in an emerging context of black political power in South Africa—in order to become something, someone different’.<sup>5</sup> In terms of narrative perspectives in literary work, this process also engendered new modes of speech that would enable an ambiguous voice of detachment to emerge in the recognition of complicity—a voice to distance the self both *from* and *in* the language and ideology that had constructed the self in the first place. Echoing what I have discussed about the ‘entanglement’ of temporality in black writing, using Achille Mbembe’s theorization, in chapter 1, in this chapter I will examine this process of narrativizing entanglement (and disentanglement) in the reinvention of whiteness in the transitional decade, specifically through the rhetorical device of irony. It is also through the use of irony that the unique narrative perspective enabled by the child figure, whose consciousness is different from that of adults yet who can only speak in the adults’ language, comes into play.

In a study of the relationship between literature and law through the quasi-legal workings of the TRC, Mark Sanders uses the example of Socratic irony to illustrate the way in which literature, or the nature of ‘the literary’ as the ultimately unverifiable, is integral to the legal procedures of soliciting and verifying testimony. When Socrates feigns ignorance and declares himself a ‘stranger to the idiom of the court—the gesture of irony par excellence’, as

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), p 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

Sanders argues, he stands for ‘a figure for the origins of the literary’.<sup>6</sup> While referring specifically to the ambiguity set to work at the hearings of the TRC, Sanders is also making a broader claim about ‘the integral relationship between the politics of democracy and the privilege of the literary as irony’.<sup>7</sup> Sanders’s theorization of the literary as irony has an implication for the act of reading, too. Suspending verifiability and withdrawing final meanings, the intrinsic ironic dimensions of literary texts are able to transform a single source of textual authority into wider responsibilities of the reading public.

Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of the politics of irony also puts an emphasis on the role of the reader. ‘The “scene” of irony’, as she terms it, is contingent upon the interpretive act beyond the definitive and intentional meaning of the ironist. The political edge of irony lies in the potential that it ‘can be used (and has been used) either to undercut or to reinforce both conservative and radical positions’.<sup>8</sup> While Sanders and Hutcheon approach irony from different conceptual positions and with different historical frameworks, they follow a common assumption that irony has a critical and political edge because it is able to play out the ambiguity inherent in language—literary language in particular—and to stage the tension between the said and the unsaid, between speech and silence.<sup>9</sup> In other words, irony is suggestive of a gesture of speaking beyond texts and of a permanent withdrawal from final, definitive authority, which can in fact be an effective means of political participation.

To map the politics of irony onto literary figurations of the child, I have chosen to focus on two works of white confessional writing around the transitional decade: Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* (1993), and Michiel Heyns’s *The Children’s Day* (2002). Whereas narratives like Damon Galgut’s *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991), or Jo-Anne Richards’ *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996), adopt retrospective perspectives of adult narrators to describe

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<sup>6</sup> Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory of Politics of Irony* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> For a historical overview of the definitions and studies of irony, see Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004).



childhood experiences, Behr's and Heyns's novels both carefully mimic children's distinctive consciousnesses and voices to depict the adult world from child narrators' perspectives. Written by male Afrikaner authors, both novels engage with reimagining Afrikaner identity—one from an urban elite community and the other from a marginal village—through ironizing the patriarchal and Calvinistic ideology of Afrikaner nationalism dispersed in discourses about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in everyday life. Rather than being *part of* the self that is to be recuperated through an adult narrator's recollection, the child figure in both novels is the exact epitome of the self, which is constructed in an ironic voice of disengagement and critique in the simultaneous recognition of complicity.

Another important reason for my choice of novels is that there is a profound critical dialogue about the notion of innocence arising out of the controversial reception of Behr's novel, including Heyns's critical reading of it. Due to Behr's revelation of having been involved in spy activities for the apartheid government, discussions about his novels have always been tied to the author's implicit intent of expiation. Often contextualized against the backdrop of the legal and social imperatives of the TRC, criticisms of *The Smell of Apples* are mostly based on its portrayal of an innocent child as instrument for the white author's self-exculpation. My reading, however, seeks to rectify this view and argue that the novel in fact problematizes the notion of innocence and provides a new mode of narrating whiteness outside the trope of the innocent child. Reading the ambiguity and openness of literary language against social and critical discourses that postdate it, I want to illustrate the ways in which the child's ironic narrative voice puts to question critical judgments that aim to enforce closures on literary texts as well as any attempts to close the page on interpretations of the past from the vantage point of the present. Serving as the proxy for representing the self in historical ambiguity, the child figure indicates the ways in which reparation for the past and prospects for the reconstitution of new nationhood in the future are both never-ending processes.

## Against the Trope of Innocence

*The Smell of Apples* tells the story of an eleven-year-old boy, Marnus Erasmus, and his growth in a hyper-masculine and militaristic elite Afrikaner family. The novel's unfolding of this process of Marnus's growth starts from the arrival of a secret family guest, a Chilean general, and culminates in Marnus's first erection after witnessing the brutal sexual and physical violence inflicted upon two other children. Towards the end of the novel, Marnus sees, through the hole in his bedroom floor, his father raping his best friend Frikkie Delport. Soon afterwards, he also sees, in hospital, the severely disfigured body of Little-Neville, the son of the Erasmus family's Coloured house servant, who has been burned in a hateful race crime. The major part of the novel focuses on portraying a corrupted patriarchal family by gradually laying bare the dark secrets of its central adult male character, Marnus's father, Johan Erasmus, a General in the South African Defence Force. Besides the sensational event of child rape, the narrative also at one point implies that Johan Erasmus 'shares' his wife with the visiting Chilean general. The violent, depraved nature of militaristic Afrikaner nationalism is simultaneously exposed in the italicized future narrative appearing intermittently within the main narrative, which reveals that the adult Marnus eventually follows his father's example of joining the army and that he dies on the battlefield.

As Behr's debut novel, *The Smell of Apples* has been read favourably and has won him much acclaim,<sup>10</sup> yet it has also caused controversy in association with the author's revelation of his experience of having been a paid informant for the apartheid regime between 1986 and 1991, while a student leader in the National Union of South African Students at the University of Stellenbosch. Just

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Tony Morphet, review of Mark Behr, *The Smell of Apples* (1995), *World Literature Today*, 70 (1996), 226-7, and Cheryl Stobie, 'Fissures in Apartheid's "Eden": Representations of Bisexuality in *The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr', *Research in African Literature*, 39 (2008), 77-86.

before the TRC started taking testimony nationwide, Behr confessed to his role as a 'spy' for the apartheid government in a keynote speech at a writers' conference, *Fault Lines: Inquiries around Truth and Reconciliation*, in Cape Town in 1996, apologizing for his activities while also arguing for 'the complex nature of truth-telling'.<sup>11</sup> Although Behr never spoke formally at the TRC hearings, his speech and writing were often scrutinized as if they were testimonies for amnesty in the TRC, and were therefore often dismissed as insincere or ineffectual confessions for the author's own culpability. Nic Borain, for example, questioned Behr's sincerity and accused him of 'exasperating self-absorption and [...] totalitarian thoroughness'. Borain criticized the way in which Behr 'phrases his confession in the literary context of the limitations of memory and language to describe truth', which made his confession a 'shutout' that left its listeners being able to do 'nothing but acquiesce or reject him outright'.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar fashion to such polemic against Behr's speech, criticism of *The Smell of Apples* also took issue with its oblique confessional intent, particularly in relation to its use of a child narrator. Heyns, in a frequently quoted article, examined the novel among a number of confessional novels in the transitional decade in terms of their prevalent evocation of the innocent child.<sup>13</sup> Questioning Behr's own explanation about his choice of a child focalizer as a deliberate withdrawal from the attempts to 'seek pardon or excuse', Heyns argued that the child's narrative voice was in fact the exact instrument by which Behr could surreptitiously achieve the absolution and exculpation that he had refused to seek openly. As Heyns said,

the child's voice may have the advantage exactly in not needing 'to demand absolution' in that it is granted absolution through the legal fiction that the child is not accountable, and the related fictional convention that children are "innocent" in a generally unspecified sense.

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Behr, 'South Africa: Living in the Fault Lines, Cape Town, July 4, 1996', *Common Sense*, (October 1996), 13-7 (p. 14).

<sup>12</sup> Nic Borain, 'The Smell of Rotten Apples', *Mail & Guardian*, 12 July 1996, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Michiel Heyns, 'The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 46(2000), 42-66.

There is, in short, a kind of absolution of form in the rite of passage novel, in its characteristic presupposition of the myth of prelapsarian innocence.<sup>14</sup>

Heyns viewed the innocence of the child as standing for the author's own innocence and therefore as an opportunistic literary device for Behr's personal atonement. Notwithstanding Heyns's logically intact evaluation of the novel, it seems to me that the association between the child and 'the myth of prelapsarian innocence' reflected not so much the presupposition of the author as that of the reader, whose critical perspective was somehow predetermined by a primary concern with the author's accountability. If we divert our chief attention from Behr's personal experience to the novel itself, it is not difficult to find that the novel's representation of its child protagonist's narrative perspective largely problematises the notion of innocence. It delineates Marnus Erasmus's voice, consciousness, behaviour, and experience as inextricably bound up with the ideological system from which the novel sets out to disengage. Already complicit in the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism from the start, the child is hardly innocent at all, if 'innocence' indicates an absolute position before or outside the hegemonic logic of apartheid's white supremacist ideological makeup.

Following Heyns's reading of *The Smell of Apples*, Rosemary Jolly puts the novel alongside her critique of TRC testimonies and points out that the TRC and literary narratives like *The Smell of Apples* are analogously complicit in creating a discourse of innocence in South Africa that produces children only as vulnerable victims and consequently 'as instruments of post-apartheid nation-building'.<sup>15</sup> Jolly argues that the prevalent trope of the innocent child-victim is a problematic social and cultural construction that fails to treat children as 'actual subjects of the state in their own right', denying their real agency and preventing the state from developing effective interaction with

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Jolly, *Cultured Violence: Narrative, Social Suffering, and Engendering Human Rights in Contemporary South Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 54.

actual children's lives.<sup>16</sup> Jolly's general argument about the problematic victimization and instrumentalization of the child in literary and sociopolitical discourses is incisive. While I concur with her injunction to be cautious about the default image of childly innocence, I would like to point out that, in terms of the particular novel *The Smell of Apples*, both she and Heyns have ignored ways in which it imagines childhood in more creative and constructive manners.<sup>17</sup>

*The Smell of Apples* is a novel about children, portraying many child characters' lives in a family environment, in school, and in their own community. It also involves various and sometimes competing representations of the child against different discursive backdrops, which include images of the innocent child as victim or political instrument. The novel at one point, for instance, shows apartheid government propaganda in a speech Marnus's father gives at Jan van Riebeeck High School as a boy—'Blood may still flow, but this country will be made safe for our children, even if it does cost our blood',<sup>18</sup> and later gives the lyrics of the national anthem, *Die Stem*, around which he has based his speech—'In the promise of our future and the glory of our past. [...] That the heritage they gave us for our children' (p. 145). This evocation of the innocent child as symbolizing promises of the future appears again in the opposing discourse of political dissent. Marnus's maternal aunt, an anti-apartheid feminist exiled to London, writes to her sister, trying to persuade her, in the name of children, out of her belief in Afrikaner nationalist aspirations. 'What will you do if, one day, one of your children were to think and act differently from you?', as she writes in the name of children, 'In closing I must beg you to remember one thing: our children might laugh at us as we do about the Middle Ages. But possibly, our children will never forgive us' (p. 111). Besides appearing in the adults' language as political symbols for promises of futurity,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 53. An obvious piece of evidence in actuality for Jolly's observation is the TRC's policy of not taking testimony from any children under the age of eighteen, following advice given by specialists.

<sup>17</sup> Both Heyns and Jolly have recognized an alternative way of representing childhood in literary narratives in this period, which is against the discourse of 'innocence'. Neither of them has, however, attributed that mode of representation to *The Smell of Apples* or associated it primarily with irony.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Behr, *The Smell of Apples* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 71. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

the child is also represented on two occasions in the novel as the direct victim of violence imposed upon them from the adult world: the killing of Little-Neville and the rape of Frikkie.

These instrumental representations of the child abound in *The Smell of Apples*, yet the novel itself, rather than endorsing these representations, keeps an ambiguous distance from them because its ironic tone is filtered throughout by the child narrator Marnus, whose consciousness and voice demonstrate a different version of childhood—a significant creative merit of the novel that both Heyns's and Jolly's readings have ignored. Rather than simply being an image of the innocent victim or literary instrument for expiating a white author's own culpability, the child narrator's voice is shot through with an ironic distance from discourses of the adults' white privilege, and at the same time establishes a self-reflexive critical edge against apartheid's racist and nationalist ideology and eventually against the novel's textual sphere itself. Rita Barnard describes the novel as 'claustrophobic' because of the fatalistic plot of Marnus's life.<sup>19</sup> In the close reading that follows, however, I shall propose a more hopeful means of reading the child protagonist—to see him as the embodiment of a new mode of imagining whiteness through the nation's democratic transition. Furthermore, the child figure's perspective, rather than creating narrative closures manifested in Marnus's own fate, gestures beyond the novelistic space itself and towards wider responsibilities for the reader.

### **Ironizing Afrikaner Nationalist Historiography**

Zooming in on an elite Afrikaner family, *The Smell of Apples* weaves its revelation of multifarious aspects of Afrikaner nationalist ideology into its depiction of the family's everyday life, all captured by the inquisitive yet

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<sup>19</sup> Rita Barnard, 'The Smell of Apples, Moby-Dick, and Apartheid Ideology', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 46 (2000), 207-26 (pp. 207-08).

ignorant mind of its child protagonist Marnus. 'My name is really Marnus', the novel begins, with the child introducing himself, 'but when Dad speaks to me he mostly says "my son" or "my little bull", and him and Mum also like calling me 'my little piccanin' (p. 1). This description of a seemingly benign, loving family environment is already seeded with a series of power relationships of inferiority and mastery, which seem to foreshadow, however remotely, the subsequent interracial and intergenerational violence. Paternalistic control over the child in a filial relationship ('my son') is cross-fertilized with humans' mastery over the animal ('my little bull') and racial supremacy over black people ('my little piccanin'). Another noticeable trait in this opening is that the child's position within the familial institution is established through the act of naming and therefore has a close bearing on the realm of language and discourse. The child is apparently not aware of any of the political implications in the adults' language, yet it is precisely through such unawareness that the novel is able to unfold its ironic edge against a hegemonic ideology embodied by authoritative adult characters: parents and teachers.

The locales of children's everyday life—the classroom, the church, the family dinner table—all become the *mise en scene* against which the contestation and negotiation between the adults' authoritative teachings and the children's reactions to them unfold. These interactions between adults and children are all carefully depicted on the basis of their psychological and linguistic differences, in which political critique is often embedded. The following passage, for example, records a conversation between Marnus's school friend Frikkie and their schoolteacher, Miss Engelbrecht.

Frikkie says his *oupagrootjie* [great-grandfather] used to get hunters to hunt the Bushmen on his farm in the Cedarberg. The hunters from Cape Town could come and they had to pay twenty pounds for each Bushman they shot. But if they shot more than one, they had to add another twenty pounds. When we learned about the Bushmen in history class, Frikkie told the story of his *oupagrootjie*. Miss Engelbrecht said it wasn't true. It wasn't the Boers that killed off all the Bushmen, it was the Xhosas. She said the

Xhosas are a terrible nation and that it was them that used to rob and terrorise the farmers on the Eastern frontier, long before the Zulus in Natal so cruelly murdered Boer women and little children. (p. 8)

Miss Engelbrecht's simplistic narrative exhibits the ways in which the plain grammar of Afrikaner nationalist historiography is constructed and how it is able to mask its inherent contradictions and lapses as a schoolteacher refutes a child's counterclaims. The politics of race and ethnicity are consolidated through the demonization of the Xhosas and the Zulus by using terms like 'terrible', 'rob', 'terrorise', 'murder', and 'cruelly'. Its political syntax also relies on self-victimization by construing the victimhood of Afrikaners as feminized and infantilized ('before the Zulus in Natal so cruelly murdered Boer women and little children'). Frikkie's family story, instead of providing a subversive historical narrative that reverses the racial, ethnic, and national politics in Miss Engelbrecht's formulations, adheres to an affinity with the singular, experiential individual in a specific, local context. In this way, this short episode of classroom interaction between the child and the teacher in fact stages the opposition between two modes of historical narration: a totalizing, monolithic narrative of nationalist historiography driven by glorification and righteousness, and a singular, individualized narrative. Apart from providing a piece of evidence from family history that counters the nationalist historical master narrative, Frikkie's account of his great grandfather shooting the 'Bushmen', though having its own underlying assumptions of racist identity construction, also seems to indicate a form of family loyalty that is ironically incongruent with the national loyalty that the teacher's 'official' history espouses.

This contrast between family stories told by the child and history lessons taught by the teacher reminds us of the radical relationship of rivalry between the novel and history in J. M. Coetzee's polemical speech 'The Novel Today' (1988), in which Coetzee also used a child/teacher metaphor to illustrate his defence of the autonomy of novelistic discourse over the dictates of historicist master narrative. The novel is a discourse, as Coetzee explains, that 'operates in



terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress)'.<sup>20</sup> Coetzee's rare oppositional tone in this piece was directed towards the prevalent historicist tendency in South African literary and intellectual circle in the mid-1980s, by whose standards Coetzee's own novels were subject to much criticism. His defence of the novel's singularity questions the functionalist view of literature as conforming to a teleological historicism in which both Afrikaner nationalist historiography and the revisionist historicism of anti-apartheid resistance are implicated. Instead, the novel, as Coetzee puts it, is a medium of 'demythologizing history [...] that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves'.<sup>21</sup>

To read the conversation between Frikkie and Miss Engelbrecht alongside Coetzee's classroom metaphor is revealing for the way in which the child figure may come to represent the voice of the literary as singular and autonomous as opposed to the authoritative discourse of collective historiography. The fact that the child does not intentionally challenge or openly confront the teacher is also indicative of the way in which a possible subversion of historical master narrative can be enacted in a self-implicating manner, as what the novelistic discourse does to demythologize history in Coetzee's contention. While Coetzee's classroom metaphor and the dialogue between Frikkie and Miss Engelbrecht in *The Smell of Apples* both seem to exhibit a straightforward opposition between the singular and the collective, it becomes a more complicated matter in the first-person narrative voice of the protagonist Marnus. It is mostly in the conflation of the child's voice and the adults' language

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<sup>20</sup> J. M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream*, 6 (1988), 2-5 (p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 4. For a more detailed contextualization and thorough discussion of the discourse of history in relation to Coetzee's own novels and South Africa's cultural and intellectual production, see David Attwell, 'The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee', *Poetics Today*, 11 (1990), 579-615.

that the novel allows its profound ironic gesture against nationalist historical discourse to surface. Being a more obedient child than his friend Frikkie, Marnus most often gives a direct quotation or reiteration of the adults' words that, as shown in Miss Engelbrecht's teaching, in one way or another represent Afrikaner nationalist historiography. As Marnus recounts,

Dad says the history of the Afrikaner, also the Afrikaner from Tanganyika and Kenya, is a proud history. Even the Prime Minister, Uncle John Vorster, said something similar in Pretoria the other day when someone asked him about the Coloured question. Uncle John said that the Coloureds will never be able to say that we did to them what the English did to the Afrikaners. The Afrikaners' struggle for self-government, and for freedom from the yoke of British Imperialism, was a noble struggle. (p. 39)

Here is a clear example not only of how nationalist historical discourse is constructed in its diction of self-glorification but also of how it is able to evade racial tension by foregrounding the conflicts between the Afrikaner and the English people, in which the apartheid government's racial oppression is overwritten and masked by the Afrikaners' 'noble' struggle against British imperialism. Such an historical narrative embedded in the tutelage of the adult becomes a form of epistemic violence, imposed upon the child either through the authoritative form of education operating within the classroom or in daily family conversations in which political content is discussed under the pretense of being benign and intimate family matters (see, for example, how the Prime Minister, John Vorster, is referred to by the child as 'Uncle John'). Transmitted through such carefully masked epistemic violence, physical violence and war are mobilized and incorporated into historiography, with certain narratives of physical violence condemned (the Xhosas killing the 'Bushmen' and the Zulus killing the Boers), some obliterated (the Afrikaners killing the 'Bushmen', the British killing Boer women and children in concentration camps), and some legitimized (the Afrikaners' struggle for self-government).

As shown in the example above, Marnus's unwitting verbatim account of his father's words has a particular ironic effect for the reader. On the one hand, a simple and childish language is able to lay bare the most basic grammar of apartheid's ideology and its inherent contradictions and falsifications. On the other hand, the novel's ironic representation of nationalist historiography is achieved through the child's act of repetition. Barnard's analysis of *The Smell of Apples* through Althusser's understanding of the question of ideology as fundamentally a mode of reproduction identifies repetition as the central trope that unravels the novel's critique of apartheid's authoritarian ideological workings.<sup>22</sup> This act of repetition is particularly embedded in the child's habit of iterating the adults' speech as a way of learning. At one point, the novel presents the full text of Marnus's school essay, which wins the highest score that Miss Engelbrecht has ever given in her ten years of teaching. Here is part of the essay:

If you walk through the museum you can learn lots of interesting things about our country. There are many interesting exhibitions and beautiful old paintings. The best ones are of the uniforms they wore in the olden days to stop the Strandlopers and the Hottentots from plundering and robbing the farms of the poor Dutch settlers. [...] Then the Boers had to make war against the Xhosas at Angola Bay and later against the Zulus in Natal because the evil Dinganes's impis murdered their wives and smashed the babies' heads against the wagon wheels. But the hand of God rests over the righteous and now our country is made up of four provinces and in 1961 we became a Republic. After three hundred years we have one of the strongest armies in the world. (p. 159-60)

The essay's content is an elaborated version of Miss Engelbrecht's teaching in history class. But the main problem lying in the replication of such narratives of nationalist history is not so much whether the teacher or the child is the original author as how apartheid's racial politics is textualized and dispersed in the endless dissemination of knowledge. The textual and discursive manifestations

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<sup>22</sup> Barnard, 'The Smell of Apples', p. 213.

of power are illustrated in the novel's constant representation of popular culture, school essays and speeches, the lyrics of the national anthem, newspapers, and family letters. It is also in children's repetition of these racist stereotypes and phraseologies embedded in varieties of textual media that the ironic revelation of the emptiness and impotency of apartheid's oppressive language becomes available to the reader.

The prevalent use of ironic repetition enabled by the child's narrative voice as a form of political critique also appears in an earlier novel in this period. Jeanne Goosen's *We're Not All Like That* (1992), first published in Afrikaans in 1990 and then translated into English by André Brink in 1992, focuses on an urban working-class Afrikaner family struggling on the edge of poverty and disintegration. The novel features Gertie, the dispassionate child narrator, her father, a railway worker who has contracted asthma after an accident and eventually dies after another one, and Gertie's mother, an usherette in a cinema who has had a failed extra-marital affair and then turns into a religious fanatic after her husband's death. In a similar manner to Marnus's voice in *The Smell of Apples*, the child Gertie's verbatim repetition of the adults' words in *We're Not All Like That* constantly exposes Afrikaner nationalist historiography and racial stereotypes in apartheid's ideology dispersed in everyday conversation. For instance, when Gertie sees a painting of the Voortrekkers in her neighbor Mrs. Kok's house, she describes the painting in Mrs. Kok's words. 'Mrs Kok says it's the Battle of Blood River and the whites on the one side are Voortrekkers. [...] The Voortrekkers killed the kaffirs because they'd knocked the white children's heads to bits against the wagon wheels and dug out their insides with the spears.'<sup>23</sup>

In both novels, the numerous sentences starting with 'Dad says' and 'Mom says' stage a unique narrative perspective that simultaneously contains a split between the child and the adult and a repetitive conflation of the language they

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<sup>23</sup> Jeanne Goosen, *We're Not All Like That*, trans. by André Brink, 2nd edn (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2007), p. 84.

use. The tension between differentiation and repetition unravels the complex workings of apartheid's authoritarian discourse, which reminds us of Homi Bhabha's conception of colonial mimicry. As Bhabha claims, colonial discourse 'often speaks in a tongue that is forked', constantly creating through the discursive strategy of mimicry the subjugated colonial subject as 'a difference that is almost the same, but not quite'.<sup>24</sup> It is in 'the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination—the demand for identity, stasis—and the counterpressure of the diachrony of history—change, difference', as Bhabha makes reference to Edward Said, that 'mimicry represents an ironic compromise'.<sup>25</sup>

There is a close resemblance between Bhabha's critique of colonial discourse and the novels in South African transition I am discussing in this chapter in terms of their narrative critique of apartheid's racist, patriarchal, and nationalist ideology. Dramatized in the process of the child's education, mimicry is embedded in these novels' ironic narrative voice of the child, which is presented as an 'almost the same, but not quite' version of the adults' ideology. To appropriate Bhabha's formulations and his reference to Said, apartheid also speaks in a 'forked tongue', which shows its 'ironic compromise' between the child's prospect for growth through the acquisition of knowledge—the tendency to develop and change—and the unfolding revelation that such knowledge hails from an ideological system that requires static repetition and conformity.

### **Imagination and Fantasy**

Instead of portraying the child as simply a passive recorder of adults' language, *The Smell of Apples* also highlights Marnus's childish imagination and fantasy as actively capable of ridiculing and disrupting apartheid's nationalist and

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<sup>24</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

colonialist ideology buttressed by Calvinistic doctrine as well as legal discourse of criminality and incarceration. The child's narrative voice triggers various forms of misinterpretation and misapprehension of his surroundings including objects and places, which, like his parents' and teachers' words, are also in one way or another coded in apartheid's racist ideological edifice. Here, for example, Marnus contemplates a religious painting at the Dutch Reformed Church at Fish Hoek that the minister's wife has brought from Israel:

One of the big paintings in the foyer is of a father and his children on the beach. It could be somewhere along Muizenberg, because the beach is long and flat with dunes in the distance, and far in the background it looks like the Hottentots-Holland. The man in the picture is speaking to his children, and in the bottom of the painting, written in big letters in the sand, it says: 'Honour Thy Father and Mother'. When I look at that painting, I sometimes wonder why only the father is there. (p. 52)

The child's attachment to his immediate local experience and his sensitivity to spot the most commonplace discrepancy between words and images bring to light the colonialist and patriarchal order underpinning the missionary narratives represented in the painting. Marnus's observing eyes see the father figure as a mismatch with the biblical text and the familial values it purports to represent, mirroring a further mismatch about his own father, whose protecting conduct towards children is eventually revealed as concealing acts of coercion and violation. Marnus's (mis)interpretation of the painting as set in Muizenberg and the Hottentots-Holland Mountain also exposes the discrepancy and displacement between the universal doctrines and the local specificities embedded in colonizing missionary work. More importantly, it speaks to the way in which such displacement is subsumed and overwritten in Afrikaner nationalist ideology. André du Toit analyses this ideology as constructed through the "Calvinist paradigm" of Afrikaner history', in which the tenets of seventeenth-century Calvinist thoughts have been used to conceive Afrikaners as God's chosen and covenanted people, like the Israelites of the Old Testament,

and then gradually used to justify racial inequality and repression.<sup>26</sup>

While the novel from time to time shows the child repeating these Christian tenets supporting Afrikaner nationalist historiography in moments such as ‘the hand of God rests over the righteous’ (p. 159) in his school essay, there are also occasions where his own imagination seems to ridicule the heroism and righteousness in the logic of Afrikaner Calvinist thought and its justification for racial discrimination. At the dinner table, for instance, when the adults are talking about how ‘the Coloureds [...] are mostly alcoholics who booze up all their wages over weekends’, Marnus tends to follow the adults’ views but thinks of his own house servant Doreen as an exception.

They’re criminals who won’t ever get to see heaven. St Peter, who stands at the portals of eternity, will pass out stone-cold when he smells their breath.

But Doreen, she’s a good girl and she might go to heaven. In heaven she’ll live with other Christian Coloureds in small houses and the Lord will reward her for never boozing it up like the rest. (p. 39)

The child’s singular and personal experience here again offers a contradictory example to the adults’ derogatory racial stereotypes of the black and Coloured populations. Nevertheless, even if Marnus sees Doreen as an exception to his uncle’s descriptions of Coloured people, he is not able to imagine Doreen’s life outside a discourse of racial politics based on legal terminology and Christian morality (‘they’re criminals who won’t ever get to see heaven’). It is only by fantasizing, in a comic and senseless way, an apostle who can pass out from the smell of alcohol and a heaven with small houses for Christian Coloureds to live in that the child can account for the contradictions between the adults’ teaching and his own experience. The comic and ironic effects of this conflation of the child’s singular experience and the adults’ logic of narration expose apartheid’s

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<sup>26</sup> See André du Toit, ‘No Chosen People: the Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology’, *The American Historical Review*, 88(1983), 920-52, and Saul Dubow, ‘Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid and the Conceptualization of “Race”’, *The Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), 209-37.

hegemonic narrative of race, which maintains its power by rendering certain experiences inexpressible and unimaginable within its logic.

As shown in the examples above, the child's imaginative responses to objects and people serve to ironize the lapses in apartheid's ideology. In a similar vein, places also offer discursive sites in which the child's fantasies can intervene. The following passage is Marnus's fantasy at the sight of Robben Island when the family is driving along Table Bay.

When the sea is calm like today, Robben Island looks closer to shore. In the olden days, Robben Island was a leper colony. But now it's the prison where they keep the most dangerous criminals. The prison warden is Theo De La Bat's father. Theo is in Ilse's class and he lives in the school hostel. He goes to the island by boat every weekend. I wonder if the De La Bats aren't scared over weekends on the island among all those thieves and murderers. I think the mad Tsafendas who murdered Verwoerd is also on the island with all the dangerous blacks who want to take over the country. Maybe the men who burned Little-Neville will be sent to Robben Island. Maybe they'll have to chop rocks for the rest of their lives, or maybe they're going to be hanged, who knows? (p. 140)

Robben Island may well be one of the most significant sites in South African history.<sup>27</sup> Geographically isolated from the mainland, the island since the earliest phase of Dutch settlement in the seventeenth century has been associated 'with political opposition, insanity, criminality, dirt, disease, the poorer classes, the very bottom of Africa'.<sup>28</sup> During the apartheid era, in particular, it served both as an actual political prison and as a symbol for the authority of state control, and the way in which discourses of deviance, insanity, and criminality were mobilized in the racist ideology of the apartheid regime.<sup>29</sup> In the child's microscopic theatre of imagination, he repopulates his own

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<sup>27</sup> For a concise source of reference for the history of Robben Island, see *The Island: A History of Robben Island, 1488-1990*, ed. by Harriet Deacon (Bellville: Mayibuye, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> *A History of Robben Island*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> For a thorough study of discourses of oppression and resistance within Robben Island, see Fran Lisa Buntman, *Robben Island and Prison Resistance to Apartheid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).



Robben Island with the scared De La Bats family, the white men who have burned Little-Neville, and Verwoerd's assassin Dimitri Tsafendas, whose life has remained a satirical mystery in South African history until today.<sup>30</sup> The political order that codifies the island as a place for 'the dangerous blacks who want to take over the country' is subverted and reinscribed in the child's fantasy. His personal experience and his ethical allegiance to his friends have created a carnivalesque version of the island with a lower class Afrikaner family like the De La Bats, the white men who have committed racial violence, and a politically (and racially) ambiguous figure like Tsafendas. Like his childish imagination of heaven, his fantasy about Robben Island creates a comic and absurd subversion of reality. The ironic message, rather than intentionally delivered by the narrator, is thus to be deciphered by the reader, who takes the responsibility for perceiving the supremacy of apartheid's narrative logic and its oppressive codification of race.

### **Bearing Witness and the Child's Silence**

In contrast to the absolute absence of children's voices in the TRC's legal settings, Behr's novel seems to have granted its child narrator a voice to describe two scenes of bearing witness. There is a fundamental difference, however, between Marnus's means of bearing witness to the two major violent events in the story. While he directly witnesses his father raping his best friend Frikkie in their own home, he is not able to see Little-Neville at the crime scene but is only able to watch his wounded body on a hospital bed. Such difference is symptomatic of a hegemonic system that creates violence in as much actual as structural manners, enforcing a limit on the extent to which an Afrikaner child might see and know a Coloured child's life. Yet the novel seems to make

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<sup>30</sup> For a recent article about the figure and the ways in which Tsafendas's life represents the 'incomprehensible' limit in academic research, see Hedley Twidle, 'Visions of Tsafendas: Literary Biography and the Limits of "Research"', *SAFUNDI*, 16(2015), 378-95.

attempts to overcome such a gap by representing the two children's violated bodies in strikingly similar details.

Frikkie's lying on his stomach. His head is covered with the pillow. The general is bent forward over him and his pyjama-pants are lying on the floor, but he's still wearing his pyjama-top. [...] He pulls Frikkie's legs apart and it looks as if he's rubbing something into Frikkie's legs and I can see his mister. It's too dark to see everything, but it seems like he pushes his mister into Frikkie's bum, and then he lies down on top of him. He starts moving around. It's just like the Coloureds with the girl in the dunes. (p. 176-77)

Little-Neville is lying on his stomach. There are tubes inside his nose and his eyes are shut. [...] He's completely naked and his arms are tied to the bed with strips of plastic to stop him from scratching the burns. His legs are drawn wide apart so that they won't rub together. Between his thighs, across his bum and all over his back it looks like a big piece of raw liver. (p. 189)

Both Frikkie and Little-Neville are lying on their stomachs with legs drawn widely apart, yet they are hardly recognizable in such similar descriptions from the back of their bodies. Marnus's own voice in his encounter with physical violence also seems to resist recognition, as his accounts of the children's bodies are devoid of any of his own emotional expressions or personal opinions at all. If Marnus's reactions towards these racial and sexual crimes can be read as testimonies, ironically they eventually only consist in the child's silence. After witnessing the rape and identifying the rapist as his father rather than the Chilean general, Marnus says and does nothing but 'pull[s] the sheets up to my chin and stare[s] at the window' (p. 177). Similarly after seeing Little-Neville's severely burned body, he remains silent and 'move[s] away to look out of the window' (p. 189). The naked and gruesome exposure of children's violated bodies becomes more upsetting because of Marnus's inability to speak about such violence, neither for other children nor for himself. If the brutality of the apartheid state manifests itself in its massive violent acts against children, as I

discuss in the Introduction,<sup>31</sup> its brutality is intensified as much here in the novel as in the TRC because of the absence of children's voices to be recognized or represented.

Despite the deeply disturbing way in which the novel describes these two scenes of bearing witness, the child's silence and his gesture to look beyond the window indicate something potentially subversive. While the novel in numerous ways reveals the contradictions and discrepancies in apartheid's racist and nationalist ideology, through the child's responses towards the adults' teaching in the act of repetition or in moments of fantasising, silence also provides a powerful trope of intervention when the child is directly facing the physical violence inflicted upon children's bodies. The counteractive dynamics between the child's silence and the adults' ideology are much more apparent in the novel's depiction of Marnus's older sister Ilse, whose silence is on various occasions exhibited as a gesture of open confrontation against the adults' authority. For instance, when Ilse points out the fact that it is three white men who commit the crime to Little-Neville, her mother persists in diverting attention from the political and racial aspects of this violent event back to her universalizing Christian morality. While his mother tells Marnus that 'it probably wasn't right of him [Little-Neville] to steal charcoal', Ilse's reaction is to open 'her mouth like she's about to say something,' before merely shaking 'her head and [looking] out the window again' (p. 138). On another occasion, after the prize-giving ceremony in which Ilse willfully plays the accompaniment to the national anthem beyond the number of verses known to the audience, when her mother interrogates her about her unusual behavior, Ilse 'keeps looking from the window without answering'; Marnus observes that while 'it seems like Mum's waiting for an answer, [...] Ilse still keeps quiet' (p. 148).

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<sup>31</sup> According to a joint report by UNICEF Innocenti Research Center and the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School, between 1984 and 1986 alone, three hundred children were killed by the police, one thousand wounded, eleven thousand detained without trial, eighteen thousand arrested on charges arising out of protest and 173,000 held awaiting trial in police cells. See Piers Pigou, 'Children and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in *Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation*, ed. by Sharanjeet Parmar and others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 115-57.

Compared with Marnus's mostly unwitting revelation of various forms of violence harboured in the adults' education, Ilse's silence here seems to be a deliberate gesture to evade the adults' hegemonic language that can only speak heroism, regulation, and dominance. It is also in the tension between children's silence and the adults' language, which is also the only language they are able to speak, that the novel maintains its irony to its very last sentence. While Marnus realizes that 'nothing is the same anymore' (p. 193) after witnessing the crimes adults commit against children, he still, on his fishing trip with his parents in the novel's final scene, says that 'it's a perfect day, just like yesterday. One of those days when Mom says: the Lord's hand is resting over False Bay' (p. 200). It is as if children's silence towards the adults' inculcation constellates and symbolizes the blind spots, excesses, and slippages in an enclosed ideological system that fosters power and violence from beginning to end.

Besides the child characters Marnus and Ilse whose voices and responses represent an operative critique of apartheid's ideology, the novel's temporal structure as a whole also seems to conceive an imaginative space of childhood that has the possibility to counteract the authoritative power of adulthood. Its dual temporality, which places childhood in the main and present-tense narrative and adulthood in the italicized secondary future anterior, makes it a peculiar type of *Bildungsroman* that problematizes the narrative continuum of a child's *Bildung* into adulthood and correspondingly questions the coherent and stable establishment of an individual subject under the workings of a hegemonic ideology. By portraying childhood as central to the narrative of the self, the novel seems to perpetuate interminably the process of growth and highlight the contingency of childhood as having the potential to evade the dictates of adult subjectivity as the containment of apartheid's ideological confines. This immanent suspension of Marnus's *Bildung* manifests itself in a dream vision near the end of the novel. While his first erection symbolizes a rite of passage that leads to an adulthood modeled upon the militant patriarch, his dream about horse riding at Muizenburg beach, in which only a woman's elusive singing

voice and four children appear, becomes an ambiguous and fugitive space of alterity beyond the nationalist and militaristic masculinity into which he is fatally coerced. Moreover, while the contingency and subversive potential of childhood indicate the novel's ironic distancing from apartheid's nationalist discourse, they are also suggestive of a self-reflexive gesture of parabasis and withdrawal from the novel's own textual space. While none of the children in the novel are able to escape the oppressive hegemony of apartheid's ideology, its imaginings of childhood as a contingent state that contains the potential to exist in silence, to look beyond, and to speak otherwise seem to pass hope onto other children outside the novelistic sphere and onto all the younger generations in the future to come.

### **Children's Sexuality and Ironizing Love**

*The Smell of Apples* is one of the few works in this period that portrays an elite urban Afrikaner family and lays bare directly the official historiography of Afrikaner nationalism. A considerable amount of white writing rather tends to show their distance from a nationalist and white supremacist ideology by portraying alternative histories and marginal identities within white communities. Shaun Irlam observes that 'the reclamation of marginal and disenfranchised Afrikaner identities' is a dominant mode in writings by Afrikaner authors in this period.<sup>32</sup> Well-known works that belong to what Irlam calls 'dissenting allegories' include Etienne van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices* (1986), André Brink's *Devils' Valley* (1998), and Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994).<sup>33</sup> In these depictions of white marginality, direct representations of the discourse of Afrikaner nationalism like those in *The Smell of Apples* have given way to more 'ordinary' aspects of everyday life, focusing on themes such as

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<sup>32</sup> Shaun Irlam, 'Unraveling the Rainbow: The Remission of Nation in Post-Apartheid Literature', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2004), 695-718 (p. 701).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 705.

landscape, animals, sexuality, and the body. Irony situated in lugubrious and sensational tales like *The Smell of Apples* also becomes associated with more elements of humour, comic, farce, and satire.

Heyns's novel *The Children's Day* is one of these works that portray the margins of apartheid's nationalist machinery with poignant satire and humour. Its representation of marginality operates on many levels. Geographically set in a marginal location, the novel records an episodic chronicle of numerous eccentric characters in the small Free State village of Verkeerdespruit in the 1960s from the narrative perspective of its child protagonist Simon. While the author himself is born to both Afrikaans-speaking parents, the novel places its protagonist linguistically at the margin of his Afrikaner community by portraying him as a bilingual child born to an English-speaking father and an Afrikaans-speaking mother. Finally, the eccentric characters with whom the child establishes close contact are also marginalized, in that they are in one way or another subject to physical deformity or sexual non-conformity: his epileptic and dyslexic school friend Fanie van den Bergh; Betty the Exchange, who has no chin; the teacher Mr. de Wet, with his ophthalmic peculiarity that makes his eyes look 20 degrees to the right; the stammering postman, Klasie, and his closeted boyfriend Trevor; the sexually promiscuous Miss Rheeder; and a paedophile dominee. Besides, the physical body and sexuality are also the significant lenses through which the novel adopts the child's ironic narrative voice to observe an adult world that, as Simon describes it, always 'conducted itself in ways mysterious not only to myself but also to itself'.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly to *The Smell of Apples*, depiction of the child protagonist Simon in *The Children's Day* pivots primarily on the issue of language. This is clearly indicated in the novel's epigraph, a poem by Robert Graves, from which the novel takes its title. Written at a time when the poet was suffering from severe post-war trauma after fighting in the First World War, the poem expresses a

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<sup>34</sup> Michiel Heyns, *The Children's Day* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2002), p. 113. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

dilemma between speech and silence as that between ‘a cool web of language’ and ‘the wide glare of the children’s day’. It sees language as Janus-faced, being able to provide ‘retreat from too much joy or too much fear’ but also as failing to accommodate certain experience that ‘children are too dumb to say’. The poem is pertinent to post-apartheid South Africa as it suggests the ambiguity of language in writing a history of trauma, which is a consistent concern that runs throughout Heyns’s novel. In *The Children’s Day*, language is the key medium that encompasses the discriminatory and violent nature of apartheid’s ideological construct. In Marnus’s irony in *The Smell of Apples*, discursive power is exposed as violence masquerading in paternal protection and inculcation, whereas in Simon’s irony in *The Children’s Day*, it is refracted and ridiculed through a narrative that always contains varieties of pathological abnormality and farcical distortion. In Simon’s ironic use of the adults’ language to describe his own experience, sexuality is constantly intertwined with pathology, physical intimacy with sexual violence, and love with corruption and crime. It is also in the gap and tension between the child’s emerging sexuality and the adults’ language he has to use to describe his own sexual desire that the novel unfolds its ironic critique against the warp and woof of apartheid’s hegemonic ideology.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault lists ‘the pedagogization of children’s sex’ as one of the four strategic units where the mechanisms of knowledge/power operated in the domain of sexuality. For Foucault, while adults fully affirmed the existence of children’s sexuality, they also saw it as ‘precious and perilous, dangerous and endangered’ and therefore as requiring mastery and regulation. It was for this reason that the discursive system of knowledge concerning the sexual education and protection of children was invented and deployed by parents, families, teachers, doctors, and psychologists.<sup>35</sup> Foucault also talked about this notion of children’s sexuality and its political implications in a radio dialogue first broadcast in 1978. In

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<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 102.

response to penal reform in France at that time, which was enforcing increasing restrictions and punishments on sexual relationships between children and adults, Foucault pointed out that the new legislative framework was questionable because its purported protection of children was based on a discourse that exerted power and control over the dangers of children's sexuality. Such power/knowledge manifested in the discourse of the penal law obliterated the possibility that children might have their own autonomous desire. More specifically speaking, it denied the possibility that children's desire might be directed towards an adult and that they might even have the agency to initiate seduction. Foucault also associated adults' discursive power over children's sexuality with children's abilities of speech, as the problematic assumption that children were incapable of autonomous desire echoed the assumption of their inability to speak about their sexuality and sexual desire.<sup>36</sup> While Foucault saw children's sexuality as the site where discursive power revealed itself, he seemed to suggest that children's own voice to describe their sexuality would be a potentially liberating means for subversion and change.

It is particularly illuminating to read Foucault's theory alongside the novelistic representation of children's sexuality in *The Children's Day*. The dramatization of Simon's emerging sexuality through his own narrative voice is one of the key features in Heyns's novelistic critique of an ideological system in which the narrator is inextricably implicated. The ironic edge of *The Children's Day* emerges exactly in the process of the child's struggle to accommodate expressions of his sexuality in the adults' language and the power/knowledge structures embedded in it. The arrivals of strangers from outside the town are significant events that trigger the child narrator's curiosity about sexuality and physical intimacy. An important figure that initiates Simon's sexual awakening in the story is the ducktailed Steve. Seen by the adults in the village as a 'white Tsotsi' and a potential 'bad influence' on children, Steve, on the contrary, with

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interview and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. by Alan Sheridan and others (New York; London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 271-85.



his gleaming motorbike and nonchalant demeanor, holds the 'allure of illegitimacy' (p. 28) and 'the thrill of recklessness, even lawlessness' (p. 31) for children themselves. Steve's mysterious aura of allure for children forms an ironic contrast with the novel's gradual revelation of the character as a thief and a pedophile. Before arriving in Verkeerdespruit, as Simon later finds out in a report in *Die Landstem*, Steve has left his wife in Welkom and pawned their wedding ring for his motorbike. He takes Simon for a naked swim, spends an illicit weekend with Betty the Exchange before stealing all her money. He disappears for a while from Verkeerdespruit with Fanie and is also accused of having kissed him, for which he is sentenced for three years in prison before eventually being killed by his cellmate.

Rather than taking an explicit moral stand in portraying such an outlaw-like figure, the novel's narration of these events through Simon's perspective constantly oscillates between the ambiguous emergence of the child's own sexual desire for Steve and the adults' language of sexual propriety. When Simon interrogates Fanie as to why Steve kisses him, he receives the answer 'because he liked me', with Fanie's smile (p.53). Simon himself has also had close physical contact with Steve and has consequently developed an admiration for Steve's adult male body. While Steve carries Simon on his back when they are swimming, Simon 'could feel the rhythmical contracting and relaxing of his back and shoulder muscles under me' (p.36). Gazing at Steve's body and touching his chest hair, Simon says that 'it looks nice on you' and blushes (p. 37-8). In the tension between these ambiguous descriptions of children's sexual desire and the adults' words of regulation, interpretations of Steve's behaviour are always full of irony and self-contradiction from which no real explanations can be resolved. For example, after Simon reads in a newspaper that Steve is killed as 'the convicted child molester' (p. 53), he has a conversation with his father that resembles very much a situation of Socratic irony, in which a (pretended) ignorant questioner lays bare the contradictions and falsifications in the language of the addressee.

'What's a child molester?'  
 'Oh. Somebody who interferes with children.'  
 'But you...the newspaper said that Steve didn't interfere with Fanie.'  
 'Well no. Not technically. But you see, that's not the way his cellmate would have seen it. To him what Steve did would be molesting.'  
 I thought for a moment. 'Fanie said...Steve kissed him.'  
 My father looked at me enquiringly, but didn't say anything, so I carried on, 'Is that what molesting means?'  
 My father seemed vaguely surprised. 'Yes,' he said, 'I suppose that would count as molesting.'  
 'So Steve was killed because he kissed Fanie?' I pursued.  
 My father thought for a moment, then shrugged slightly and said 'Yes. I suppose that's what it amounts to.' (p. 58)

By pitching Simon's own desire and Fanie's expressions of intimacy ('kissing') and satisfaction ('smiling') against the adults' language of legal and moral regulation ('interference' and 'molesting'), the novel dramatizes the moral dilemma and ambiguity about such sexual contact between children and adults. This moral dilemma is further set against the adults' authoritative language through which the child could only arrive at a facetious conclusion that 'Steve was killed because he kissed Fanie'. It is as if the child's curiosity for knowledge ironically betrays the moral order in the adults' ideology that is originally intended to protect children.

The sense of moral ambiguity in representing child sexual abuse also exists in *The Smell of Apples*, despite the fact that such ambiguity is easily overshadowed by the novel's overtly bleak and deterministic plot. The child's sexual awareness and physical desire, particularly the desire for the adult male body, are widely exhibited in the novel. Marnus's admiring gazing upon his father's body is depicted in the recurring scene of them taking shower together in the bathroom. Marnus meticulously observes his father shaving (p. 14), follows the way in which he washes and dries himself, and observes how his 'whole chest and stomach are covered with hair and his John Thomas hangs from a bushy black forest' (p. 63). While peeping through the hole in his

bedroom floor, the child's admiring gaze is also from time to time directed towards the scar on the Chilean general's naked back. As the 'naughty' counterpart of the narrator Marnus, Frikkie talks about sex and shows his sexual awareness in a more explicit manner. He points out to Marnus that 'a whale's thing is eight feet long' (p. 10), teases girls by mimicking strip dance, and is always sensitive enough to pick up sexual innuendoes in adults' conversation. These scattered depictions of children's developing sexuality throughout the novel all add ambiguity to the final rape scene, around which we readers from Marnus's account of the sexual act itself, which consists only in physical descriptions, do not know the violent nature of its happening. Pairing such moral ambiguity derived from the novel's representation of children's sexuality and child rape with Marnus's eventual reaction of silence, we may perceive another dimension of the novel's ironic compromise—between children's capability of expressing autonomous sexuality and the impossibility of them being heard and represented in sexual violence.

In *The Smell of Apples*, expressions of children's sexual desire seem to be completely engulfed by the explicit exposure of intergenerational sexual violence. *The Children's Day*, however, dramatises more elaborately the ambiguity of children's sexuality. Using the language of the adults' power, the child narrator's voice is tweaked into satirical conversations and farcical situations in his numerous interactions with authoritative adult figures. The fact that the child cannot find the proper language for his sexuality initiates the novel's ironic depiction of an ideological system that constantly exerts its authoritative power. Vocabularies of sexual regulation, as shown in the previous example about Steve's molestation, are further implicated in the political and historical situation of South Africa in the 1960s when the apartheid state was increasingly enacting legislation to enforce state control. The child's 'Socratic questioning' continues into his enquiry about the event of his schoolteacher Mr. de Wet hitting him and breaking his jaw. After learning that Mr. de Wet will be transferred to another school instead of being legally responsible for his actions,

Simon asks his father why it is molesting for Steve to kiss Fanie but not for Mr. de Wet to break his jaw. He receives the explanation that it is 'a matter of definition', and his parents give the example of the Sabotage Act.

'Well, then, sabotage used to mean planting a bomb and blowing up something; but the Sabotage Act now defines sabotage in such a way that it can mean, well lots of other things.'

'Anything that the government regards as a threat to itself,' my mother interjected.

My father carried on. 'So sabotage is now, as I was saying, a matter of definition.'

'And who makes the definitions?'

'The people in charge, the people who make the laws. In the case of the Sabotage Act, the law defines certain acts as sabotage and punishes them accordingly; in Fanie's case, the law defines a grown-up man kissing a boy that he's not related to as molesting, and sends the man to prison.'

'But why?'

'Well, as punishment for the crime, and to protect other people.'

'You mean because he may kiss other people too?'

My father looked at my mother and signed. 'Not quite. Let's just say for an adult to...be too fond of children is not...natural.'

'Is it natural for an adult to hit children?'

'Well not natural, perhaps, but it may be necessary if the adult is in a position of authority.' (p. 88)

The conversation cleverly weaves together the power of parents and teacher with that of the state, both revealed as 'a matter of definition' issued from a position of authority. This matter of definition, which ironically defines kissing as acts of unnatural molesting but deems apparent physical abuse of children as 'necessary', is also what lies at the heart of the laws of the state. In a language governed by authoritative domination established by the reciprocal existence of the state and the adult, the child's description of physical intimacy ('kissing') seems out of place and preposterous. It is in exposing the ironic co-existence of intimacy/affection (kissing and love) and violence/crime (molesting and abuse) that the novel unmask and ridicules the nature of a hegemonic discourse, which consolidates domination and control under the guise of parental

protection over children.

Like teachers and parents in *The Smell of Apples*, in *The Children's Day*, authoritative figures like Mr. de Wet and the dominee are also embodiments of the dominating patriarchal order of apartheid's ideology. The novel's ironic and satirical representation of the child's emerging sexuality against the discursive backdrop of the language of authoritative power is most apparent in Simon's description of his first sexual exposure to the paedophile dominee. When the dominee appears behind the lectern with 'GOD IS LOVE' embroidered over it at a Sunday service, Simon recognizes him as the stranger who has sexually assaulted him the day before. While the child struggles to find words to recollect his first sexual exposure, his descriptions of the body's experience are only to be intertwined with the language of the Bible in the dominee's sermon. The child's narrative voice, which describes his fantasy at the service, is an ironic, satirical juxtaposition of sexual terms that the dominee has used the day before and biblical references to the Ten Commandments. For example, Simon feels thoroughly confused about his own sin as 'the Lord had not seen fit to include biting His Dominee or coming all over the place in His list of prohibitions' (p. 196). Only being able to identify himself with the ram in the sacrifice of Issac, the child 'wondered what God would have done if the sheep had bitten Abraham' (Simon bit the dominee's tongue the day before) (p. 197). He even feels sorry for the dominee because he is delivering a sermon while 'being stared at by someone whom he pronounced the previous day to have a promising hot dog' (p. 198). The most satirical scene in this episode happens at the exit of the church where the dominee says 'let not thy left hand knoweth what thy right hand doeth' and secretly pinches Simon's bottom under his black gown (p. 199).

In a similar fashion to the ways in which Marnus's sexual *Bildung* in *The Smell of Apples* is educed and somehow imposed upon him by the authoritative, violent power of adults, Simon's awareness of his body's desire and his sexual *Bildung* in *The Children's Day* is also depicted as a process of violent coercion conducted by authoritative adult figures. The child's initial autonomous

awareness of sexuality—his desiring gaze upon the body of Steve, the outlaw—is subsumed under the two events of physical and sexual ‘education’ at the hands of figures of authority: one by the teacher’s beating and the other by the dominee’s sexual violation. There is a governing tension throughout the novel between the child’s impulse to find words for his experience of sexuality and the only available language to him, which consists in varieties of political, religious, and moral law of a hegemonic ideology.

The ironic representation of the child’s body and his sexual *Bildung* is frequently implicated in the racial politics of apartheid South Africa. The novel’s critique of the absurdity and violent nature of a racist discourse is expressed through Simon’s affection for Dumbo, a dog he has bought from a black man, which is depicted as incongruous with an ideology that masks and justifies power by defining love. Mr. de Wet teaches the children that ‘love without discipline is sentimentality, and discipline without love is tyranny; but love with discipline is the nourishment of the soul’ (p. 76). Simon’s claim for his love for the dog, however, is refuted as meaningless and he is advised by the teacher to ‘give up love as soon as possible’ (p.79-80). Mr. de Wet’s discipline that aims to ‘nourish’ love is ironically exposed here as the adult’s authority to control children’s love. As Dumbo is bought from a black man, Simon’s affection for him is further oppressed in the racist vocabularies of the adults. When the police captain’s son Louis calls the dog ‘kaffir dog’, Simon objects to the term ‘kaffir’ but receives the answer:

‘Kaffir dog, native dog, Bantu dog, same difference,’ he said. ‘My father says there are too many of them and they don’t have licences.’

‘Dumbo has a licence, so he’s not a ... native dog.’

‘He’s a kaffir dog with a licence, that’s all,’ he taunted. ‘It’s like...like a kaffir with a driving licence. He’s still a kaffir, isn’t he?’

This logic seemed wrong to me, even in a country that I was starting to realize had its own rules of classification. But I couldn’t explain to Louis where he was wrong and so I contented myself with patting the unconscious Dumbo and saying, ‘As long as he’s my dog it doesn’t matter what anybody calls him.’ (p. 163)

The derogatory terms used against the black subject and the animal subject are turned against themselves because of the childish, comic debate that ridicules the logic of the discriminatory language Louis clearly adopts from his policeman father. Nevertheless, Simon's decision to retain his care and personal allegiance despite the country's 'own rules of classification' never leads to any optimistic outcome, as Dumbo is eventually shot to death by Louis's father, who suspects him of being rabid, although he is not.

Under the workings of an ideology that cannot host the child's desire for Steve nor his affection for Dumbo, he can only find expression for himself in physical pathology, especially Fanie's epilepsy, and the act of biting. The first time Fanie has a seizure in the classroom, Simon sees Fanie biting Miss Jordan's fingers with blood all over his mouth (p. 19). Afterwards sexual behavior and eroticism are only described in relation to Fanie's seizure. After seeing his school principal Mr Viljoen having sex with Miss Rheeder, Simon describes Mr Viljoen as 'having a fit' (p. 155). Simon's own sexual exposure to the dominee also reminds him of Fanie's fit and ends in Simon biting the dominee's tongue (p. 192). Simon's desire to claim and receive mutual affection is expressed in the act of letting himself be bitten. As he sees Dumbo being shot in his back yard, he rushes to the dying dog in the rain and puts his fingers in its bleeding mouth (p. 174-5). This moment mirrors the novel's concluding scene, in which Simon again witnesses Fanie's fit while he is about to apologize to Fanie for calling him a pervert. As Simon watches Fanie's 'frail body punishing itself in its fierce assault upon the earth, the image of love under the spell of the passion it cannot tame nor deny nor even articulate' (p. 244), he puts his hand in Fanie's mouth in spittle, blood and rain (p. 244).

Compared with Marnus's gesture of silence and looking out of the window in *The Smell of Apples*, Simon's gesture of being bitten as the child's autonomous action of expressing himself seems rather gloomy. However, both novels have presented the child's consciousness and sexuality as the counteractive narrative

vehicle against apartheid's ideological structure. While the child cannot speak outside such power structures, their narrative voice indicates an ironic compromise between discursive workings operated through mastery and domination and the child's sexual desire as a site of emergence and change. It is true that, plotwise in both novels, the child characters are not yet able to stand up to the adults' power. But in terms of literary rhetoric, the child's inability to speak is precisely a form of empowerment, because their ignorance is in fact the adult authors' 'feigning' of ignorance, which enables white writers to imagine effective political participation and deliver operative critique. It is only by withdrawing an authorial voice as a child that the novels are able to imagine new modes of selfhood and new identities as a process perpetually in the making and, more importantly, to deliver responsibilities beyond the texts themselves and to the reader.

## **Conclusion**

White narratives of the self in the transitional period began to substantially examine and critique the ideological foundations of white privilege in apartheid South Africa while at the same time seeking new voices to write themselves into new citizenship in the democratic nation. Literary narratives also began to invest in new genres and forms to envision possible means of distancing and critique in the recognition of complicity. Although irony has always been an important feature in white writing in apartheid South Africa, as I have discussed in Gordimer's first novel in Chapter 2, it became a dominant mode in white confessional writing in the transition to democracy. The child figure, whose consciousness exhibits a difference from adults yet who is only able to speak in the adults' language, mirrors white writers' ambiguous relationship with a discursive system that they strive to maintain a distance from but remain inextricably bound up with. From the narrative perspective of the child, various



aspects in apartheid's ideological construction revealed in the child's everyday life are ironized and ridiculed. From the patriarchal, militaristic, and Calvinistic Afrikaner nationalist historiography to the regulation and moral control of the body and sexuality, the child narrator stands as a subversive figure and a voice of critique that constantly exposes the adults' world consisting in real as well as epistemic violence. By positioning the self at the threshold of an ideological system buttressing white privilege, in the figure of the child, white writers are imagining a new way of political participation in the democratic nation through the gesture of withdrawal.

## Chapter 4

### J. M. Coetzee: Politics of the Child, Politics of Nonposition

In the rich yet unhappy interior world of the child protagonist named John in J.M. Coetzee's first fictionalized memoir *Boyhood* (1997), there are numerous self-reflexive moments when the boy ponders his own condition of being a child. This is an unusual element to be found in narratives adopting the focalization of a child yet quite revealing in terms of the political workings of the child as a significant trope in Coetzee's oeuvre, which will be the chief focus of this chapter. John's childhood in the rural Western Cape town of Worcester is almost the diametrical opposite of a childhood filled with innocent joy, of the kind he sees in Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*. In contrast, his experience in Worcester, according to the boy's own description, is nothing but 'a time of gritting the teeth and enduring'.<sup>1</sup> And for that matter, he loathes his childhood—'the ugly, black, crying, babyish core of him' that always makes him 'still a baby' who 'will never grow up' (p. 94). Even when he envisions his future as having physically outgrown his childhood, he still sees himself 'as stupid and self-enclosed as a child: childish; dumb; ignorant; retarded' (p. 161). While the boy seems to be involuntarily trapped in an unhappy childhood, there is, nevertheless, a desperate need to cling to it—a dogged refusal to grow up, which guards the self from oblivion and keeps the self in visibility. In situations of shame and embarrassment from which the boy desperately seeks an escape,

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1997), p.14. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

he finds himself on the verge of crying 'I am just a child!' (p. 107, p. 135) When he tries to imagine his own death, he finds it impossible to envisage his disappearance from the world because 'always there is something left behind, something small and black, like a nut, like an acorn that has been in the fire, dry, ashy, hard, incapable of growth, but *there*' (p. 95). This stubborn babyish core of the self that resists growth remains a recurrent trope in the two fictional memoirs following *Boyhood*. In *Youth* (2002), the second installment of what would become an anthologized trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life* (2011), the protagonist John is in his early twenties and has relocated from Cape Town to London. Grappling with city life in 1960s London in bewilderment and angst, he repeatedly considers himself as a child who has not grown up. 'Something of the baby still lingers in him',<sup>2</sup> as he says, he is 'still a child, ignorant of his place in the world, frightened, indecisive'.<sup>3</sup> In *Summertime* (2009), the third volume of his memoir trilogy, one fragment in the undated notebooks that belong to the already deceased author named John Coetzee revisits his despondent childhood years spent in Worcester, from which he (the fictional persona John Coetzee) draws a fairly certain conclusion that he is essentially 'the product of a damaged childhood'.<sup>4</sup>

*Boyhood* is Coetzee's first long narrative work to embody fully the consciousness of a child character, but the stalled growth of the child figure emerging from his memoir project reminds us of numerous characters in his earlier fictions that bear similar childlike qualities. One may well think of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), whose delirious monologue and erratic perception of place and people around her seem to cast her in a state of childhood. 'I am a child again', she says, 'an infant, a grub, a white shapeless life'.<sup>5</sup> In *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), the obscure and simpleminded eponymous protagonist is often treated as a child. 'You're a baby', one of the

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<sup>2</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56.

<sup>4</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977), p. 55.

characters, Robert, says to K, 'You've been asleep all your life'.<sup>6</sup> Friday in *Foe* (1986), in a similar vein, is trapped in his childhood after his tongue being cut off while still a boy. Because of this, he remains afterwards 'inasmuch as a slave and a child'—'the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born but cannot be born'.<sup>7</sup>

The recurring metaphor of the child's failed growth in Coetzee's work has profound political implications too. Often depicted in the power relationships between the child and the adults in the roles of parents or teachers, the child's stalled growth indicates not so much a passive situation as a gesture of refusal to comply with the authoritative inculcation imposed upon them. As the notebook fragment in *Summertime* suggests, while the purpose of education is to 'form the child as congregant, as citizen, and as parent to be', John's childhood years at school in Worcester are about his stubborn resistance against such education and his 'refusal to accept that the end goal of education should be to form him in some predetermined image'.<sup>8</sup> Echoing many characters in his early fictions and emerging fully as a child figure for the first time in his memoir, the child who refuses to grow up and to be educated has become a significant trope in Coetzee's oeuvre, especially since the late-apartheid period, for his ongoing novelistic critique of colonialist and neocolonialist forms of power. This figure of a recalcitrant, intractable child appears again as a central character in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), the enigmatic late-style novel published after *Summertime*.

In this chapter, I will examine the child figure as a metaphor for political critique by focusing on the two child characters in *Boyhood* and *The Childhood of Jesus*. Referring broadly to other works in Coetzee's oeuvre including fictions and critical essays, my reading seeks to address a crucial debate in Coetzee scholarship about the complex relationship between his writing and South

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<sup>6</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), p. 121. Coetzee's notebook shows that he once thought about calling the novel 'The Childhood of Josef K'. See David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> *Summertime*, pp. 252-53.

African history and politics. In light of this, I follow David Attwell's proposition to read the politics of Coetzee's novels as a form of 'situational metafiction', which casts its political edge through a combination of the aesthetic norms of high modernism and postmodern metafiction and the discourse of anticolonial critique in relation to South Africa's specific historical conditions.<sup>9</sup> In the previous chapter about white confessional writing around the transitional decade, I argue that the child, due to its particular relationship with the adults' language and therefore with writing per se, represents the ambiguous position of the white writer, whose voice of critique is necessarily implicated in certain forms of complicity. This statement holds true for Coetzee's work too. In this chapter, I will associate the critical salience of textual ambiguity in Coetzee's novels with his withdrawal from taking any political position as a self-consciously formed nonposition—a gesture that has been largely present in his novels and is elucidated in his article 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry' (1997). Andrew van der Vlies examines Coetzee's memoir project in terms of its relevance to contemporary South Africa, associating Coetzee's modernist intertexts and his self-reflexive generic critique (autobiography and *Bildungsroman*) with his anti-politics and political nonposition.<sup>10</sup> While Van der Vlies's reading focuses on representations of various forms of disaffection, my reading seeks to illustrate the political vigour of that nonposition by revealing the ways in which Coetzee's critical voice, mostly drawn from his critical essays, is mapped onto the narrative embodiment of the child figure. The first part of this chapter considers the child's narrative voice in *Boyhood* as mirroring Coetzee's anti-pastoralism. The second part examines *Boyhood* together with a number of Coetzee's late-apartheid novels and explains that the child stages the tension between the materiality of the body and the symbolic nature of language and representation. Rooted in the trope of the body, the child is crucial

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<sup>9</sup> David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 51-74.

to Coetzee's novelistic disruption of generic conventions and his ethical and political critique of the South African situation around the democratic transition. The third part focuses on *The Childhood of Jesus* and argues that the child's resistance against patriarchal tutelage and the father's reversed role as the child encapsulate Coetzee's political nonposition—a gesture containing both profound critical energy and subversive and transformative potential.

### **The Child, the Mother, the Farm, and the Failure of Love**

In the last of his interviews in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee gives a brief retrospective on his childhood years spent in Worcester. Narrated in the third person, as in *Boyhood*, this short summary provides a synopsis for what later becomes his first semi-fictionalized memoir.

His years in rural Worcester (1948-1951) as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time of raging Afrikaner nationalism, a time when laws were being concocted to prevent people of Afrikaans descent from bringing up their children to speak English, provoke in him uneasy dreams of being hunted down and accused; by the age of twelve he has a well-developed sense of social marginality.<sup>11</sup>

*Boyhood* zooms in on the child's interior struggle to come to terms with the sense of social marginality permeating all aspects of his life. Uneasiness with 'raging Afrikaner nationalism' finds expressions in the child's everyday life. The memoir, for instance, depicts the child's complex attitudes towards the Christian Afrikaner boys at school on numerous occasions. He finds that 'the most beautiful boys [...] are in the Afrikaans class, as are the ugliest' (pp. 56-7). His relationship with the Afrikaans language also stages his discomfort with his own Afrikaner identity.<sup>12</sup> Besides, the child's aberrancy in the dominant

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<sup>11</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 393.

<sup>12</sup> I am aware that any single example from *Boyhood* might oversimplify Coetzee's engagement with the Afrikaans language represented in the memoir as well as in many other works. For a detailed discussion of

Afrikaner culture in Worcester is established in secretive personal allegiances not known to his parents. He chooses to be a Roman Catholic at school even though his family doesn't attend church services at all. He also secretly sides with the Russians against the Americans despite knowing that it is a 'serious matter' that 'can have you ostracized' (p. 26).

Such a pervasive feeling of alienation from his own ethnic background is interwoven with his fraught affections for his mother. Compared with his father's 'bland and boring' family who 'has never taken him to its bosom', he has a close bond, 'too close' even, with his mother (p. 37). Therefore he persistently puts the sole blame on her for his abnormality and unnaturalness. 'He is angry with his mother for not having normal children and [...] turning him into something unnatural' (p. 8). This sense of 'abnormality' is at the same time attributed to the reversal of a patriarchal structure in the familial institution. 'In a normal household, [...] the father stands at the head', whereas in his own case 'it is the mother and children who make up the core' (p. 12). 'His difference from other boys may be bound up with his mother and his unnatural family' (p. 35). 'He wishes she would be normal. If she were normal, he could be normal' (p. 38). The child's wavering emotions towards his mother, however, are in sharp contrast to his steadfast attachments to the family farms. 'Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance. [...] All farms are important. Farms are places of freedom, of life' (p. 22). This bifurcation between perceptions of the mother and the farm results in a split in the child's expressions of love: he grows 'cold-hearted toward his mother' (p. 35) and completely denies his love for her while pouring his 'devouring love' (p. 91) onto the farm. The following two passages elaborately illustrate the child's complex consciousness in which such splitting love plays a crucial role.

Her blinding, overwhelming, self-sacrificial love, for both him and his brother but for him in particular disturbs him. He wishes she did not

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this, see Rita Barnard, 'Coetzee in/and Afrikaans', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 25 (2009), 84-105.

love him so much. [...] The thought of a lifetime bowed under a debt of love baffles and infuriates him to the point where he will not kiss her, refuses to be touched by her. When she turns away in silent hurt, he deliberately hardens his heart against her, refusing to give in. (p. 47)

He must go to the farm because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more. Everything that is complicated in his love for his mother is uncomplicated in his love for the farm. Yet as far back as he can remember this love has had an edge of pain. [...] The farm is called Voëlfontein, Bird-fountain; he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name, birds that as dusk falls gather in their thousands in the trees around the fountain, calling to each other, murmuring, ruffling their feathers, settling for the night. It is not conceivable that another person could love the farm as he does. (p. 79-80)

The child refuses to respond to his mother's love that he sees as blinding, overwhelming, baffling, and infuriating, yet his love for the farm is incessant and almost insatiable despite it having 'an edge of pain' because of the farm's inability to respond to him. It is as if, in the child's mind, love is inextricably bound up with irresponsiveness and denial. Divided between the extremes of either too much or too little, love is only to be manifested in the suffering feelings of repugnance and entrapment. 'He sees no sense in love' and love is 'a word he mouths with distaste' (p. 121). 'Love: this cage in which he rushes back and forth, back and forth, like a poor bewildered baboon' (p. 122).

The child's narrative voice and his emotive expressions find echoes in many of Coetzee's significant commentaries on the consciousness of the white self in South Africa prior to the publication of *Boyhood*, most notably in the notion of the failure of love in his 1987 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech. Here, as Coetzee says of the 'unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa',

their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed toward *the land*, that



is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.<sup>13</sup>

It is not hard to observe that such failure of love masked by an excessive talk of love directed towards the country's vast landscape lies as much at the heart of white consciousness in South Africa as at the heart of the marginalized white child in *Boyhood*. The psychic life of the child fully represents the 'deformed and stunted inner life' derived from 'the deformed and stunted relations between human beings', as Coetzee further explains in his speech, 'that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid'.<sup>14</sup> Such deformity and stuntedness are reverberated in the child's perception of himself as someone who will always fail to grow up. 'Whoever he truly is, whoever the true "I" is that ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood', as the narrator in *Boyhood* says, 'is not being allowed to be born, is being kept puny and stunted' (p. 140).

The correspondence between the child's complicated love for the mother and the farm and the unfree, deformed, and entrapped colonial consciousness has correlation to the literary culture that has written the landscape of South Africa into being in the first place. In his perceptive critique of the South African pastoral tradition in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), Coetzee observes that South African pastoral projects have created two visions of 'dream topography': one is 'a network of boundaries crisscrossing the surface of the land, marking off thousands of farms, each a separate kingdom', and the other is a rival topography that encodes South Africa 'as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in it rocks, and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face.'<sup>15</sup> Coetzee's conception of dream topography is also evoked in the child's description of his family farm in *Boyhood*. 'In his

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<sup>13</sup> *Doubling*, p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 6-7.

imagination Voëlfontein is a kingdom in its own right. There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush' (p. 91). He conceives Voëlfontein as a farm that 'exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be here' (p. 96). For both the white colonist writer and the child narrator alike, the South African landscape is defined by as much its crisscross boundedness in space—farms as separate kingdoms in their own right—as its infinite unboundedness in time—older than man and dinosaurs and unchanged from eternity to eternity—which in turn becomes not so much a landscape of grandeur as the equivalent of an ahistorical temporal void.

Literature that responds to such empty landscape, as Coetzee continues to argue in *White Writing*, is 'a literature of failure': 'a failure to imagine a peopled landscape'; 'an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self'; and 'the failure of the historical imagination'.<sup>16</sup> While examining various forms of writing associated with such a literary tradition from early colonial travellers' reports to English landscape poetry, Coetzee pays special homage to Olive Schreiner's classic novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Providing a foil to *plaasroman*—the Afrikaans farm novel—Schreiner's anti-pastoral farm novel depicts the African farm as 'an unnatural and arbitrary imposition on a doggedly ahistorical landscape'. Serving as a critique of colonial culture, Schreiner's novel reveals 'the alienness of European culture in Africa' and attributes the 'unnaturalness to the life of her farm'.<sup>17</sup> Schreiner's negative rewriting of the old natural order of the pastoral manifests itself in her negative portrayal of the people on the farm. Subverting the mythical stereotypes of the benign patriarch, the servile women, and the innocent children, Schreiner's farm is ruled by Tant' Sannie, as Coetzee poignantly observes, 'the greedy, cruel, selfish, man-eating matriarch'.<sup>18</sup> Her anti-pastoral critique is in the same way written into the precocious and disheartened children like Lyndall and Waldo,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

whose childhood is not about innocent bliss but about ‘agonized pain’ and ‘its intense loneliness’.<sup>19</sup>

Coetzee’s own early novels demonstrate an apparent lineage from an anti-pastoral tradition in South African writing started by Schreiner, especially in the depiction of unnatural and noninnocent children.<sup>20</sup> While the memoir *Boyhood* could hardly be labeled as anti-pastoral, its depiction of the child’s consciousness seems to exhibit an obvious allusion to the suffering children in Schreiner’s novel. While Lyndall seems to be, as Attwell points out, the ‘forerunner of Magda with her surging inner life on a colonial farm’,<sup>21</sup> it is Waldo the boy that bears a close resemblance to John in *Boyhood*. The opening of *The Story of an African Farm* depicts Waldo’s innermost struggle because of his doubts about God. As Waldo sits and weeps alone on the kopje at night, he buries his pain and sorrow deep in his own heart—a heart ‘cold, so hard, and very wicked.’<sup>22</sup> Although the child’s narrative voice in *Boyhood* has a much more ironic and comic tone to it, we could still see the association between Waldo and the lonely and ‘cold-hearted’ boy John whose childhood is divested of any moment of happiness and innocent bliss.

### **Confession, Autobiography, and the Child’s Body**

The allusion to anti-pastoralism in *Boyhood* reveals a correspondence between the narrative voice of the child and the critical voice of the author J. M. Coetzee, which is, nevertheless, different from the fictional persona John in his memoir project. This slippage between the hidden authorial voice and the authoritative autobiographical adult narrator is staged in the memoir’s choice of a

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<sup>19</sup> Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough discussion of Coetzee’s anti-pastoralism, see the chapter, ‘Dream Topographies’, in Rita Barnard, *South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 15-40.

<sup>21</sup> Attwell, *Life of Writing*, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Schreiner, p. 26.

present-tense and third-person narration to render childhood experience. Cutting across the authority of an adult narrator that may lay final claim on the truth of his life story, this narrative technique puts to question the generic limits of autobiography. In Coetzee's inaugural address titled 'Truth in Autobiography' at the University of Cape Town in 1984, he points out that autobiography is usually thought of as truth-telling rather than fiction-writing whereas 'the gaps and evasions, perhaps even the lies, are then elements of the life-story, elements of the making of the story, elements of the maker of the story'.<sup>23</sup> He reiterates this idea in an interview, stating that 'all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography'.<sup>24</sup>

Coetzee's scepticism of the limitations of generic convention also has close relevance to his discussion about the discourse of confession in his essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts' (1985), which engages with the notion of confession for 'its underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self' through an in-depth analysis of the works of Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky.<sup>25</sup> While the religious concept of grace can bring an end to confession, as Coetzee argues in this essay, such an end to self-truth cannot be reached in a secular context. Using Dostoevsky's example, Coetzee arrives at the conclusion that 'the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception'.<sup>26</sup> While this endless process of truth-seeking embedded in the rationale of confession is necessarily enacted in a narrative structure, he is also warning against the danger of a hidden narrative authority that may deceptively grant a closure to one's confessional process.

The choice of person and tense in *Boyhood*, therefore, directly points to the impossibility of truth-telling by revealing as much the generic boundary of autobiography as the deceptive nature of confessional closure. As Derek

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<sup>23</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Truth in Autobiography* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Doubling*, p. 391.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

Attridge puts it, the third-person present-tense narrative 'prevents the interminable spiraling of confession by short-circuiting it before it even gets going'.<sup>27</sup> By cutting the cord between the narrative voice and the narrated consciousness, Coetzee's account of his childhood has eliminated any possibility for remorse, a condition that may allow the adult self to end the path to self-truth. Attridge uses one salient example from *Boyhood* to explain the author's 'purely personal cruelty' in not allowing himself any such moment of remorse in the text.<sup>28</sup> It happens after John puts his brother's hand in a grinding machine which eventually leads to the amputation of half of his brother's middle finger. Instead of showing remorse, the child narrator is heartless while remembering this accident. 'He has never apologized to his brother, nor has he ever been reproached with what he did', as the third-person narrator describes this event, '[n]evertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding' (p. 119). Such cruelty in narrating one's past deeds is a gesture of refusing the emotional comfort of remorse, which is the indispensable vehicle for the end of confession. It also indicates the author's critique against a possible narrative authorial judgment—the narrative authority of the hidden voice of the adult narrator—that may grant absolution for the confessing self. This position of critique is made possible as much by the memoir's third-person present-tense narrative technique as by its emulation of the narrative voice of a cold-hearted child and his situatedness in the body. In the example quoted above, the condition for remorse is rejected yet the memory does not disappear. It still exists in the child's body and as his memory of the body. It is the perpetual weight of the body, a child's body in particular, that stands counter to the impulse for absolution that will eventually liberate oneself from the oppression of memory.

Coetzee's metafictional and ethical critique is profoundly political too. As I

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<sup>27</sup> Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: The university of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 143.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

have argued in the previous chapter, in my reading of Michiel Heyns's *The Children's Day* in particular, the child's body—its sexuality and desire—represents the counter pressure against authoritarian power and mirrors the ironic critical voice against the power structures and discursive violence embedded in a hegemonic ideology in apartheid South Africa. While the two novels I have analyzed in the previous chapter tend to formulate their critique directly against the racial, sexual, and gender politics of apartheid's ideological construct, *Boyhood* adopts a child narrator to offer another layer of self-reflexive critique against its own current discourse of confession, which is related to the TRC, and against the blind optimism for a post-apartheid future at the turn of the nation's democratic transition. This is certainly not to dismiss the rich and detailed ironic depictions of apartheid's ideology in the memoir. Rather I want to bring attention to the ways in which *Boyhood* has also given its voice of critique a self-reflexive turn, resisting the closure of its own confessional gesture. The impenetrability of childhood experience of the body serves as a vigorous narrative vehicle that perpetually suspends narrative closures, implying the endless process of the white author's confession while at the same time imagining a position of critique against the authoritarian power of narrative authority implicated in colonialist and neocolonialist discourse, which will not come to an end with the end of the apartheid state.

One example of this voice of critique embodied by the child's desire is John's response to his schoolteacher Miss Oosthuizen's beating of his classmate Rob Hart.

Though Rob Hart is not clever and is perhaps even in the danger of failing the standard, he is attracted toward him. Rob Hart is part of a world he has not yet found a way of entering: a world of sex and beating. [...] The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame. [...] Nevertheless, he knows that pain is not the most important consideration. [...] What he will not be able to endure will be the shame. So bad will be the shame, he fears, so daunting, that he will hold tight to his desk and refuse to come when he is called out. And that will be a greater shame: it will set him apart, and set the other boys against him

too. (p. 6-7)

The child's body is inscribed here in his attraction to Rob Hart intertwined with his awareness of physical violence—'a world of sex and beating'. While his awareness of the body's desire triggers his perception of the adults' world and its power over children, it also initiates an endless chain of shame that cannot be resolved in his condition of unnaturalness and abnormality. Rather than the act of beating itself, it is the 'idea of being beaten' that makes him shameful. The knowledge of such shame becomes 'a greater shame' that further sets him apart from normality. In this narrative, Coetzee lays bare the endless process of confession in the affective chain of shame initiated by the autonomous yet impenetrable desire of a child. This passage mirrors exactly the opening of Coetzee's 'Confession' article where he analyses one episode from Augustine's *Confessions*, in which Augustine reveals his robbery of a neighbour's pears as a boy. As Coetzee notes:

In the time-before of which the *Confessions* tells, the robbery brings shame to the young Augustine's heart. But the desire of the boy's heart (the mature man remembers) is that very feeling of shame. [...] [T]he knowledge of its own desire as a shameful one both satisfies the desire for the experience of shame and fuels a sense of shame. And this sense of shame is both experienced with satisfaction and recognized, if it is recognized, by self-conscious searching, as a further source of shame; and so on endlessly.<sup>29</sup>

As the passage above shows, what Coetzee has recognized in Augustine's confession is the impossibility of knowing 'what lies at the beginning of the skein of remembered shame'. The impenetrability of 'the desire of the boy's heart' becomes almost the centrifugal fulcrum against which the mature self's drive to master fully the knowledge of the beginning of shame is constantly held in check and the end of confession permanently suspended. In Coetzee's own

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<sup>29</sup> *Doubling*, p. 251.

dramatization of this process in *Boyhood*, a significant aspect of the child's desire is its corporeal and sexual nature. It is as if Coetzee's authorial presence in his critical writing is translated into the narrative perspective of the embodiment of the child in his memoir. The close correspondence between the child in *Boyhood* and the author's critical voice exhibits an intricate relationship between childhood and the self. It is not so much a matter of belonging, as one may deduce from the most commonplace phrase 'someone's childhood', as an exposure of the child as the other to the self—the 'autre' in *autrebiography*, a term that has been coined by Coetzee himself and widely adopted to describe his memoir.<sup>30</sup> Experience of the child's body represents a disjunction in the text from which the end point of truth-telling and the definition of autobiography become fundamentally destabilized. The same can be said about my reading of the correspondence between Coetzee's anti-pastoralism and John's relationship with his mother and the farm. It is because of the way in which childhood experience is necessarily constructed allusively through the mediation of narrative language and sociopolitical discourses that the limits and the otherness of the generic confines of autobiography can be illuminated.

Mike Marais observes that the child is a prominent metaphor for 'the Other' throughout Coetzee's fictions. 'The recurring motif of the lost, abandoned, deformed, dead or unborn child', as Marais argues, is the self-reflexive trope for the absolute irreducibility of otherness.<sup>31</sup> Reading Coetzee's fictions through theories of Derrida, Blanchot, and Levinas, Marais claims that the recurrent theme of the quest for the lost or unborn child represents Coetzee's ethical gesture in his writing—a gesture involving his ongoing attempts to attend to the invisible other in the visible domain of history.<sup>32</sup> Although Marais's close reading of the leitmotif of the child is quite convincing, he fails to recognize certain aspects in Coetzee's fictions that also complicate the concept of the

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<sup>30</sup> See Margaret Lenta, 'Autrebiography: J. M. Coetzee's "Boyhood and Youth"', *English in Africa*, 30 (2003), 157-169.

<sup>31</sup> Mike Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. xiv.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.



absolute other. A significant theme that Marais' analysis ignores completely is the materiality of the body that Coetzee often associates with the representation of otherness. One of the most prominent examples of this material dimension of the Other and the empowerment of the body might be the character Friday in *Foe*. Friday's silence represents the absolute limit of historical knowledge and an irreducible form of otherness beyond textual representation, whereas his existence is grounded in the body. There are two crucial moments when Coetzee in his novel empowers the material existence of Friday's body: one is Friday's dance; the other is the novel's utopian concluding scene, in which Susan Barton enters a space by the sea and recognizes that 'this is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday'.<sup>33</sup>

The tension between an irreducible otherness created within textual representation and a material embodiment of such otherness is one of the key contestations staged in Coetzee's fictions, in which embodiment of the other is often associated with the representation of disabled, pathological, and aging bodies.<sup>34</sup> Because the body of the other is also associated with the trope of race, as in the case of Friday whose voice is eliminated completely, it becomes a much-contested issue in the South African and African context.<sup>35</sup> Coetzee writes self-mockingly about his view of the body and Africa in *Summertime*. In the last interview conducted between the deceased author John Coetzee's fictional biographer, Vincent, and his former colleague Sophie, Sophie comments that John 'saw Africa through a romantic haze' and that 'he thought of Africans as embodied'. In Africa 'body and soul were indistinguishable'. He also 'had a whole philosophy of the body, of music and dance', which she herself sees as

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<sup>33</sup> *Foe*, p. 157.

<sup>34</sup> There are numerous readings of Coetzee's works through disability studies. See, for example, Alice Hall, *Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee, and the Nobel Prize for Literature* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and also the chapter 'J. M. Coetzee: Speech, Silence, Autism, and Dialogism' in Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Benita Parry, for example, argues that the way in which Coetzee's narrative strategies subvert colonialist forms of knowledge by representing the silenced subaltern in fact 'inadvertently repeat the exclusionary colonialist gestures'. See Benita Parry, 'Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee', in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 149-165.

'old-fashioned Romantic primitivism' and 'politically unhelpful'.<sup>36</sup>

This is, of course, an ironic misreading of Coetzee's silencing of the black slave Friday as simply re-enacting the figure of the noble savage in the legacy of Romanticism, and repeating the mind/body dichotomy established in the logic of Enlightenment Reason. The body in fact indicates a disjunction of the colonialist logic. The lack of voice of the other (the racial other in the case of Friday) addresses an irretrievable loss in historical representation, yet the materiality of the body recognizes the existence of the other and insinuates hopes for the future when its voice may potentially emerge. The tension between an abstract otherness inherent in the textual sphere and the materiality of the corporeal body is central to Coetzee's representation of the child. In *Boyhood*, and more noticeably so in *The Childhood of Jesus*, the child figure and the voice of that figure, although represented as the other to the adult/parent subject, are not registered in a form of otherness as ultimately irreducible or invisible. Its otherness has its visible existence in the body and as the body. Coetzee not only recognizes that existence but also attaches to it the subversive potential to transform the adult subject. It is this transformative potential of the child—both in itself and for the adult—that makes it a particularly important trope to understand the politics of Coetzee's writing and the political implication of the body. The double vision evoked by the child—the materiality of the body and the immanent other within the self—is exactly the place from which Coetzee's writing formulates its voice of critique.

This double vision of the child is powerfully depicted in the South African context in *Age of Iron* (1990). The protagonist Mrs. Curren's reaching out towards her own daughter living outside South Africa, which Marais interprets as 'her responsibility for what is not ontologically present, for what has not yet emerged',<sup>37</sup> is paired with her witnessing of black militant children in the townships. While Mrs Curren's narrative of the self is staged in her endless

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<sup>36</sup> *Summertime*, p. 231.

<sup>37</sup> Marais, p. 96.

quest to reach out for her absent daughter as well as her own lost childhood, it is also driven by her growing awareness of and empathy with the deaths of two black children, her maid Florence's son Bheki and his friend John, as well as their bodies' existence in her life.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the contest between Mrs. Curren's absent child living in America and the bodies of black children in Guguletu has implications for the confrontation between Western forms of knowledge and South Africa's particular historical realities—in this case, the intensifying racial conflicts after the Soweto Uprising. In the endless confession of Mrs. Curren, a retired Classics professor and a liberal intellectual, is dramatized in the ways in which the growing violent visibility of black children's bodies perpetually puts to question her own epistemological frameworks informed by classics and liberal ideals.

Coetzee's metafictional reflections on varieties of Western epistemological systems become more apparent in his late-apartheid writing. He starts to portray characters who are academics or writers themselves and whose own subject positions are grounded in certain frameworks of knowledge originating from Europe. Besides Mrs. Curren, the retired classics professor, such protagonists also include David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999), who used to be a professor of Romantic literature, and the eponymous protagonist in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a celebrated writer whose fame begins from her rewriting of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and whose lectures in the novel engage deeply with Western philosophy. These novels also in one way or another exhibit the body—themes relating to cancer, sex, aging, and the animal—as the counteractive narrative force to expose the problematics and limitations of the epistemological systems that have shaped the protagonists' subjectivities in the first place. The critical message delivered through these works applies as much to novelistic discourse as to reading and critical practice. Marais' reading of the child, which fails to recognize the critical energy embedded in the trope of the

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<sup>38</sup> For the historical context of school boycotts during the state of emergency in relation to the representation of childhood in this novel, see Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 129-143.

child's body, is also symptomatic of the limitations of discourses produced from a Western context, even discourses of subversion including poststructuralism and postcolonialism. While he has taken into full consideration the historical and political contexts of Coetzee's writing, he does not pay attention to the strong tendency of scepticism in Coetzee's works, which always engage with the depiction of materiality and corporeality to question established theoretical and discursive assumptions.

From Coetzee's late and post-apartheid writing, the child emerges as an ambivalent figure, mobilizing the complex relationship between the metaphorical nature of textual representation and the materiality of the body as well as the relationship between Western epistemological constructs and South Africa's particular colonial and postcolonial history. It is also in a child's narrative perspective in *Boyhood* that we can perceive a mode of discourse that is able to counter various forms of narrative authority through the experience of the child's body, which mirrors the author's own critical voice and its political message in which the affirmation of the materiality of the body is crucial to the deconstruction of textual power. Such a stance against discursive modes of power is deeply lodged in the South African situation. As Coetzee puts it, 'in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body.'<sup>39</sup> In Coetzee's writing in South Africa's transitional decade, his endless scepticism about the precariousness and instability of textual practice—including his own novels and his critique of colonialist and neo-colonialist forms of power—become gradually associated more with the trope of the child and the issue of children's education. Attwell points out that the ending of *Disgrace*, with the expectation of Lucy's unborn child, shows Coetzee's personal as well as political 'anxieties about the future' and about 'being an ageing parent and imagining one's children and *their* future'.<sup>40</sup> Coetzee also once 'thought of putting together a volume of short acerbic essays

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<sup>39</sup> *Doubling*, p. 248.

<sup>40</sup> Attwell, *Life of Writing*, p. 224.

on South Africa, one of which would reply to the new education policy of “affirming the child” with a Nietzschean injunction that children should be taught to repress the demonic in themselves.’<sup>41</sup>

These notions about childhood—their bodies being the site of critique and their education being a form of epistemic violence—all resurface in *The Childhood of Jesus*, and become the central motif in this novel. In the author’s late style, the most austere dialogic interactions between a child and an adult revolve around the contestation and negotiation between the materiality of the body and discursive systems that engender authoritative power. Coetzee’s political critique revealed through the exposure of textual power is dramatized and foregrounded in this novel in the caring and education of a difficult child and his filial relationship with an aging parent. As the novel and its sequel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), both belong to a new stage in Coetzee’s writing marked by the author’s own emigration to Australia after the publication of *Disgrace*, it is necessary here to first linger for a moment on the implications of the novel’s fictional setting and the ways in which it could be read alongside Coetzee’s South African writing and the political resonances it evokes.

### ***The Childhood of Jesus and Its Context***

*The Childhood of Jesus* tells a story that takes place in the Spanish-speaking city of Novilla, a fictional location that has an austere quasi-socialist setting, into which newcomers arrive via a relocation centre. Residents who arrive in Novilla have been wiped clean of their memory, allocated new names, new jobs, and new families. The forty-five-year-old Simon and the five-year-old boy David meet on the boat to Novilla, and Simon takes the role of David’s father while trying to settle in the new place. Simon recognises one of Novilla’s residents Ines as the boy’s mother. The novel follows the recalcitrant child’s difficult time

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

in school and with his new parents until they as a new family depart together from Novilla for a new destination.

After Coetzee's emigration to Australia, he published three novels set in the country of his new citizenship—*Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007)—prior to the publication of *The Childhood of Jesus* in 2013. Nevertheless, Australia as a new novelistic setting indicates something quite different from South Africa in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* or Russia in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). Melinda Harvey points out that Coetzee's three Australian novels demonstrate an escape from a sense of place, which is made possible by writing Australia as a 'non-place' or a place 'less artificially constructed than systematically erased.'<sup>42</sup> This notion of 'non-place' also coincides with the notion of 'non-history'. As Marijana says to Paul in *Slow Man*, 'don't mind if you come with this history or that history, in Australia you start zero. Zero history.'<sup>43</sup> Attwell and Elleke Boehmer both associate features of this new phase of writing with the issue of realism. Boehmer argues that Coetzee's 'jobbing or perfunctory' representation of the *reality* of Australia can be explained through the framework of Australia's national literature.<sup>44</sup> Situating the three novels in the continuities and changes in Coetzee's oeuvre, Attwell claims that they demonstrate the author's further flight from his long held efforts in keeping the illusion of realism as the real and that they show his deeper engagement with fictional self-reflections on the nature of literary representation.<sup>45</sup> It could be said that *The Childhood of Jesus* has pushed this move a step further. If Australia serves as the nominal symbol for Coetzee's attempts to construct a 'non-place' with 'zero history' as his gesture of moving away from realism, *The Childhood of Jesus* confirms this move with its fictional setting of Novilla, a further departure from any recognisable reality.

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<sup>42</sup> Melinda Harvey, 'In Australia You Start Zero', in *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*, ed. by Chris Danta and others (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 19-34 (p. 20).

<sup>43</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> Elleke Boehmer, 'J. M. Coetzee's Australian Realism', in *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*, ed. by Chris Danta and others (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 3-18.

<sup>45</sup> Attwell, *Life of Writing*, pp. 236-37.

Because of this intellectual current underlying the shift of place from South Africa to Australia, Coetzee's Australian novels cannot simply be read as a clear cut-off from South Africa despite the author's own relocation and the novels' manifest textual content. Louise Bethlehem reads *Elizabeth Costello* alongside the discourse of the TRC, and argues that the novel's 'persistent interrogation of the relations between representation and material embodiment' draws itself back into post-apartheid literary culture.<sup>46</sup> While I would balk at categorizing *The Childhood of Jesus* under the rubric of post-apartheid literature, Bethlehem is right to caution against a universalist reading of Coetzee's Australian phase works in spite of the fact that their increasing engagements with metafiction seem to tantalize the reader to do so. That message applies to *The Childhood of Jesus* as well, which is probably Coetzee's most allegorical work so far. Its biblical allusions in the title and in the names of its characters would easily invite a reading of it as a secular rewriting of the allegory of the universal Everyman. However, as Attridge points out, Coetzee's novels themselves have always staged the issue of allegory and therefore 'seem half to solicit, half to problematize' an allegorical reading.<sup>47</sup> *The Childhood of Jesus* would be no exception but only stages that issue under a more enigmatic guise.

Near the end of *Disgrace*, Lurie's daughter Lucy accepts her humiliation and makes the adamant assertion to 'start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing.'<sup>48</sup> If we read Coetzee's novelistic construction of a non-place with no history in his Australian novels as a sequential step following the end of *Disgrace*, it would be fair to say that the fictional setting of *The Childhood of Jesus* also bears the historical weight of post-apartheid South Africa. As a migrant subject, his authorial indebtedness to South Africa is buried under the novel's universalist facade. In an early interview, he regards the 'South

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<sup>46</sup> Louise Bethlehem, 'Elizabeth Costello as Post-Apartheid Text', in J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and others (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 20-35.

<sup>47</sup> Attridge, *Ethics*, p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), p. 205. For two incisive interpretations of Lucy's rape and her gesture of silence, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes in Teaching', *Diacritics*, 32(2002), 17-31, and Lucy Valerie Graham, 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29 (2003), 433-44.

African situation as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism'.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, it will be equally fair to say that his engagement with 'a wider historical situation' is somehow embedded in his understanding of the discourses arising out of the South African context. The 'zero history' and 'non-place' of *The Childhood of Jesus* might somehow be read as the 'theory' of Coetzee's more realistic (comparatively speaking) fictions. As I have mentioned earlier and I will discuss in more detail in due course, Coetzee's withdrawal from taking any categorical alignments in relation to South African politics has been a profound politically engaging gesture to critique colonialist and neocolonialist forms of power. While this gesture has been embedded in the figuration of the child in his memoir and some late-apartheid novels, it has come to the fore in *The Childhood of Jesus* in its trope of the child and the motif of family, fatherhood, and education.

### **The Institution of the Family and the Reconstitution of Fatherhood**

The familial institution has been the microcosm of the ethical and political world upon which Coetzee's novels always project themselves, and the authority of parents over children is a recurrent metaphor for the discursive power that they seek to deconstruct. Critics have already paid attention to Coetzee's persistent portrayal of the problematics of family life. Paola Splendore finds in Coetzee's novels a recurring theme of 'the loss and dissolution of family life' and family relations 'invariably strained, distorted, marked by violence'.<sup>50</sup> Michela Canepari-Labib maintains that the isolation of Coetzee's characters is mostly situated in the communicative difficulties between parents and

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen Waton, 'Speaking: J. M. Coetzee', *Speaking*, 1(1978), 23-5 (p. 23).

<sup>50</sup> Paola Splendore, "'No More Mothers and Fathers': The Family Sub-Text in J. M. Coetzee's Novels", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 28 (2003), 148-61 (p. 148).



children.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Gillian Dooley argues that the familial bonds between parents and children are always 'fraught with ambivalence and conflict'.<sup>52</sup>

Similar to the institution of the nuclear family, the institution of school as a manifestation of authoritative power in a child's life is also largely problematized in Coetzee's novels. In an interview Coetzee talks about his own school experience as a child and his opinions of institutional education in general. He says:

If you mean [to ask] what I learned in educational institutions, the answer must be, nothing...It's not so much a question of what they lost as of the deformations they underwent. The system was authoritarian. It taught obedience. Obedience was, in a sense, its real subject-matter. Most it cowed; some it turned into bullies.<sup>53</sup>

The negative experiences of school in apartheid-era South Africa constitute a crucial underpinning for Coetzee's depiction of children. In *Boyhood*, John, being an obedient student with top exam results, is at heart suspicious of and even satirical about what he has learned at school, particularly in history and geography.

Although, in examinations, he gives the correct answers to the history questions, he does not know, in a way that satisfies his heart, why Jan van Riebeeck and Simon van der Stel were so good while Lord Charles Somerset was so bad. [...] Andries Pretorius and Gerrit Maritz and the others sound like the teachers in the high school or like Afrikaners on the radio: angry and obdurate and full of menaces and talk about God. (p. 66)

This passage mirrors the representation of Afrikaner historiography prevalent in many white autobiographical writings in the transitional period, as I have explained in the previous chapter. The child's ironic voice serves as a vehicle to

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<sup>51</sup> Michela Canepari-Labib, *Old Myths-Modern Empire: Power, Language and Identity in J. M. Coetzee's Work* (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Gillian Dooley, *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2010), p. 152.

<sup>53</sup> James Scott, 'Voice and Trajectory: An Interview with J. M. Coetzee', *Salmagundi*, 114/115 (1997), 82-192 (p. 82).

critique the logic of authoritarian historical discourse embedded in school education. Compared with John's rebellious gesture hidden behind his behavioral obedience, David, in *The Childhood of Jesus*, completely fails to fit in his school. His refusal to learn to read and write and his disobedience of school regulations bring him to a special learning centre at Punto Arenas. After escaping from it, he describes it as a concentration camp with barbed wire and boys like 'criminals' who are forced to eat fish and wear sandals everyday (pp. 243-44). While schools are depicted as the manufacturers of epistemological oppression, schoolteachers are portrayed as authoritarian figures whose personalities are seemingly obliterated by their position within schools as authoritarian institutions. In *Boyhood*, John 'cannot imagine any teacher having a life outside school' (p. 5). To the child, his teachers Miss Oosthuizen and Mr. Lategan are exclusively associated with their different styles of using canes in classrooms. Similarly, Señor Leon in *The Childhood of Jesus* has a dead eye made of glass, which looks disturbing even to the adults. His cold manners and indifference to his teaching are also typical of Coetzee's critique of the ineffectuality of school education.

Compared with rather straightforward negative depictions of the authoritarian nature of the school and the teachers, the dissolution of parental authority and the theme of family life are invested with much more nuanced content. In contrast to Coetzee's usual negative posture of critique as an overall stance in his fictions, *The Childhood of Jesus*, which brings the parent-child relationship to the forefront, seems to adopt a more positive and constructive mode of narration with an actual child character at the centre of it. It makes possible both a reconstitution of the family under the authority of a child, and a redefinition of aging and being a parent as a process of becoming the child. A significant starting point for this reconstitution of parenthood and the family is the giving up of the authority of biological parent-child relations. On the boat to Novilla, David has lost the letter about the information of his birth, and Simon's responsibility as the child's carer and his gradual recognition of his paternal

role as the narrative proceeds start, in fact, from the negation of biological connection. At the beginning of the novel, Simon tells Ana at the Relocation Centre that David is 'not my grandson, not my son, but I am responsible for him'.<sup>54</sup> In Coetzee's fictions, birth relations have been a significant factor in his questioning of parental authority. The biological parent-child relationship is sometimes annihilated by killing and death such as Eugene's murder of his son in *Dusklands* (1974) and Magda's imagined murder of her father in *In The Heart of the Country*. The 'default' filial relationship defined by birth is also problematized by children who are absent or lost, as in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, and by sons and daughters alienated from their parents, as in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Yet, on the contrary, parents who have no biological connections with those who appear to be their children tend to show a devoted sense of parental responsibility and strong emotional bond. We have seen Dostoevsky's persistent efforts in finding his step-son Pavel's diaries in *Master of Petersburg*, and Paul Rayment's determined commitment to pay for his nurse Marijana's son Drago's education in *Slow Man*. The ways in which Susan Barton takes care of Friday in *Foe*, the Magistrate takes care of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Mrs. Curren takes care of Vercueil in *Age of Iron*, are depicted in parental terms. Friday and the barbarian girl are also repeatedly described as childlike.

Such parental responsibility and care stripped of the authority of biological birth becomes the metaphoric illustration of Coetzee's notion of charity, the one possible ethical action to bring an end to the endless scepticism of the secular world. As Coetzee claims in his interview, 'a measure of charity' is the way in which 'grace allegorizes itself in the world'. This measure of charity is also described in the metaphor of parental responsibility, as he further explains that 'we are all children, unreconstructed, [...] to be treated with the charity that

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<sup>54</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 30. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text.

children have due to them'.<sup>55</sup> *The Childhood of Jesus* provides a narrative mirroring the redefinition of parentage through the development of the relationship between Simon and David. In fact, the novel is not so much about the adult's failed attempts to educate the child as about the adult learning to be a parent simultaneously by being taught by the child and by recognizing the child within himself. For the major part of the novel, Simon has been taking full responsibility for David, yet he constantly refrains from calling himself a father. Instead of being David's father, he is at one point David's uncle and at another point his godfather. His ongoing efforts and failures to teach the child are intertwined with his own frustration with his ineptitude, his loss of passion, and his aging. As he grapples with making sense of the child's language and his refusal to be taught, Simon is at the same time questioning his own quasi-paternal role and sense of self. A major transformation of Simon's status happens near the end of the novel, when he is staying at the hospital because of a broken leg from work, trying to understand the world from David's perspective 'as a mental exercise' (p. 248). It is after realizing that the child might be 'the only one among us with eyes to see' that he affirms himself as the boy's father for the first time (p. 250). Soon after this revelation, when Simon is protecting the child from the police, he claims that 'I was the one who brought him here to Novilla. I am his guardian. I am in all respects that matter his father' (p. 252). Such fatherhood is established in the perpetuation of charity and responsibility for the child on the one hand and the renouncement of patriarchal tutelage on the other. It also envisions the re-establishment of a new family that recognises the authority of the child in place of the father. 'Spanish doesn't have a word for exactly what we are, so let us call ourselves that: the family of David' (p. 260). This process of the father learning to be a child, however, does not end here. The novel's sequel *The Schooldays of Jesus* portrays the child's education in dance school, but it is eventually Simon who puts on the child's dance slippers and begins to learn to dance.

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<sup>55</sup> *Doubling*, p. 249.

The metaphorical implications of fatherhood can be understood in terms of the difference between maternal and paternal roles in Coetzee's work. As my earlier analysis shows, *Boyhood* highlights the figure of motherhood as deeply associated with landscape. John claims that 'he has two mothers. Twice born: born from woman and born from the farm' (p. 96). This association between the mother and the farm indicates Coetzee's conception of the South African landscape as somehow bearing a maternal quality. As he puts it in the essay 'The Burden of Consciousness in Africa' (1977),

Africa is a mother who has nourished them and their forbearers for millions of years. South Africa, mother of pain, can have meaning only to people who can find it meaningful to ascribe their 'pain' ('alienation' is here a better word) to the failure of Africa to love them enough.<sup>56</sup>

The reciprocal metaphor of the mother and the land hinges on emotions as well as the notion of nature and substance, whereas the father stands for the realm of rules and laws that indicates mastery and conformity. In *Boyhood*, although John dislikes his father, he gets from him his passion for cricket and rugby (p. 50-54), sports which, in Coetzee's essay 'Four Notes on Rugby' (1978), are ascribed 'an explicit ideological function'. As opposed to free play, the way in which children learn to play sports according to its codes and rules represent the moment at which 'the knee is bent to government'.<sup>57</sup> Such patriarchal forms of laws and authorities are also exhibited in Coetzee's novels as textual authorities in the realm of abstraction and language. As David Lurie says in *Disgrace*, 'by comparison with being a mother, being a father is rather abstract business'.<sup>58</sup>

The questioning of the discursive existence of narrative authority in the metaphor of parentage is staged in *Foe* as Susan Barton meets the mysterious girl who claims to be her daughter. Susan Barton's slippage from her authorship

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<sup>56</sup> *White Writing*, p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> *Doubling*, p. 125.

<sup>58</sup> *Disgrace*, p. 63.

is coterminous with her failure to recognize her own motherhood to the girl. Believing that Daniel Foe is the girl's father, she told her that 'your parentage comes to you in the form of stories' and that 'you are father-born. You have no mother'.<sup>59</sup> Her test of motherhood through physical contact by kissing the girl on the lips also fails in the doubt of the girl's 'flesh crumbling and floating away like paper-ash'.<sup>60</sup> The different metaphorical meanings of motherhood as substance and fatherhood as discursive authority in a child's life is summarized by Simon in *The Childhood of Jesus* as 'to the mother the child owes his substance, the father provides the idea' (p. 104). In the novel, compared with Simon's prolonged recognition of his fatherhood, the maternal connection between Ines and David, though also without the affirmation of biological relation, is instant and intuitive. Simon recognizes Ines as David's mother the moment they see her in tennis court. She is referred to as the child's 'natural mother' (p. 80), while in contrast David's paternal role in the child's life is described as made up of 'stupid formulas' (p. 78).

This depiction of fatherhood as the abstract domain of laws and orders seems to echo the Lacanian term 'Name-of-the-Father' and its significance in his theoretical paradigm of subjectivity. Adopting a crucial function in leading the child into the law-governed world of language, the Name of the Father plays a vital role in a child's development from the primal union with the mother to its entry into the Symbolic Order.<sup>61</sup> In the earliest book-length study of Coetzee's novels, Teresa Dovey reads Coetzee's novels as Lacanian allegories. While Dovey's study recognizes the theoretical sophistication of Coetzee's fictions (an approach that signals a critical tendency in many later studies), her reading has been criticized for using Lacan's theory of the subject as a form of master code to decipher Coetzee's works.<sup>62</sup>

The association between Coetzee's fictions and psychoanalysis is, however,

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<sup>59</sup> *Foe*, p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>61</sup> See Jacques Lacan *The Psychoses: the Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> See Attwell, *Politics*, p. 2, and Barnard, *Apartheid*, p. 25.

without doubt.<sup>63</sup> The major problem with Dovey's reading is in fact the notion of allegory, which treats narrative work as illustrations of some universal models of human subjectivity. In fact, psychoanalytic discourse itself has an allegorical dimension within it as its theoretical assumptions are based on narratives of human development—particularly about the experience of childhood. The Lacanian subject, which starts from an originary lack and comes into formation in constant splitting, is unimaginable without the figure of the child. Coetzee admits Lacan's influence by saying that 'some of Lacan's most inspired remarks have been about speaking from a position of ignorance' and that 'one can afford to speak without "thought"'.<sup>64</sup> Coetzee's own position of ignorance and mode of speech without thought is also to be found in his childlike narrators and in the child figure. The voice of the child in Coetzee's novel is depicted as having the subversive potential to deny Name of the Father and to disrupt the Symbolic Order. Such a child figure transforms the order of temporality in human development as a linear process of growing up into a cyclical process of aging and becoming the child. It can also be translated into a spatial and geopolitical dimension. Speaking from the boundary between the Symbolic Order and the body, the child's narrative voice also questions the established boundaries of the adults' epistemological systems and the limits of Western and Eurocentric discourses while encountering various forms of local specific histories and realities.

### **The Child and Political Nonposition**

To speak from the position of ignorance and to speak with no thought as a child does—a gesture Coetzee borrows from psychoanalytic discourse—has political

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<sup>63</sup> Coetzee mentions the influence of Freud and Lacan in his interviews in *Doubling the Point*. For an in-depth discussion about his conception of the relationship between fiction-writing and psychotherapy, see J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (London: Harvill Secker, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> *Doubling*, pp. 29-30.

implications too. In his article 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry', Coetzee discusses the energies and problematics of such a position—a 'nonposition', as he calls it—through the case of Erasmus and his *The Praise of Folly*. Choosing not to take sides in the rivalry between the Pope and Luther, Erasmus represents a political role, a problematic kind in his time though, of sketching 'the possibility of a position for the critic of the scene of political rivalry, a position not simply impartial between the rivals but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry altogether, a *nonposition*'.<sup>65</sup> Erasmus thus in the name of Folly offers an analysis of 'the problematics of finding or creating a position in-but-not-in the political dynamic, a position not already given, defined, limited and sanctioned by the game itself'.<sup>66</sup> Coetzee then lists two contemporary theorists—Foucault and Lacan—as prime examples of those who have fully played out the critical strength of such a paradoxical political nonposition. While Foucault's critical voice is enabled by returning authority to 'madness as a voice counter to the voice of reason', Lacan is able to do so by giving voice to the unconscious.<sup>67</sup>

Although Coetzee in this article does not mention the figure of the child, it is not hard to find the similarities between the position of the child in a narrative structure and the position of Erasmus's folly, Foucault's madness, and, apparently, Lacan's unconscious. In Coetzee's literary critical essays later collected in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999*, which were written around the same period as the Erasmus article (it was first published in 1992), he analyzed the political ambiguities of some of the significant contemporary white writers originated from Southern Africa including Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Breyten Breytenbach, and Alan Paton. What Coetzee finds in their literary narrative work, sometimes in contrast to their own claimed political stance, is a paradoxical voice that cannot be incorporated into either side of the

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<sup>65</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 84.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.



political rivalries in which they have positioned themselves. Such a voice, as Coetzee's analysis shows, very often finds expressions in narratives about the child.

In 'Gordimer and Turgenev', Coetzee maps Gordimer's South Africa in the 1960s and the 1970s onto Turgenev's Russia in *Fathers and Sons* after the Russian revolutions of 1848. Gordimer's recourse to Turgenev (later given up) derives from her ambivalent attitude towards the Leftist radicals in the anti-apartheid resistance, which resembles the ambivalent feelings of nineteenth-century Russian liberals towards the revolutionaries. While Turgenev expresses such political ambivalence—'the politics of being above politics'—in his novel in a generational master metaphor of 'the evolution of rebellious son into complacent father', Gordimer's ambivalence (Coetzee mostly draws on her critical writing in this article) eventually comes down to 'doubting her own right to reserve her position, or even to have any position at all'.<sup>68</sup> In 'The Autobiographies of Doris Lessing', Coetzee traces Lessing's paradoxical relationship with communism and her affiliation with the British Communist Party in the 1950s. While exploring the obscure motive of her early political activity—'the mystery of the self and the destiny it elects', as Coetzee points out, Lessing in her autobiographical writing returns again and again to her childhood experience. 'Her exploration of her past as a Party member parallels her exploration of her past as a daughter'.<sup>69</sup> In 'The Memoirs of Breyten Breytenbach', Coetzee summarizes Breytenbach's political program, to quote from his *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution* (1996), as 'fighting for revolution against politics'. Usually taken as an Afrikaner dissent, Breytenbach's political antipathies, nevertheless, have also been directed against white liberals, the Communist Party, the ANC, the Coloured middle class, the TRC, and the 'politically correct' new artistic and academic establishments in post-apartheid

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<sup>68</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999* (New York: Penguin, 2002), pp. 225-9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

South Africa.<sup>70</sup> Coetzee links Breytenbach's exploration into his ambiguous position in South Africa to a significant childhood event he alludes to several times in his memoir *Dog Heart* (1999). As the seven-year-old Breytenbach thinks he's already dead after surviving a choking fit, the adult author's 'returning to the land of the dog is in a sense a search for the grave of the dead child, the child dead within him'.<sup>71</sup> In 'South African Liberals: Alan Paton, Helen Suzman', Coetzee explains Paton's ambiguous political stance, particularly after the dissolution of the Liberal Party. His paradoxical political commitment, however, is already embedded in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). Underneath his 'confident liberal stance, calling for greater idealism and commitment to Christian and democratic values', as Coetzee suggests by referring to Tony Morphet's criticism, the governing feeling in this novel is his 'fear for himself and his humanity, fear the future of South Africa and its people'.<sup>72</sup> Such an emotion is evoked in a significant passage from which the novel takes its title, which also uses the metaphor of the child. 'Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply'.<sup>73</sup>

Coetzee's reading of these writers' political ambiguities and the power of their writing emerging from not taking sides in political strife mirrors the critical energy embedded in such political ambiguity that Coetzee aims to enact in his own writing. The political nonposition of these writers, although usually not out of their own voluntary choice as Coetzee seems to suggest, is inherent in their narrative work, especially in the crucial trope of the child as manifested in a generational and filial relationship. The political implications that have been captured in the child's body in *Boyhood* are evoked again in the child figure and his mode of speech in *The Childhood of Jesus*. In fact, the figure of Jesus in the title implies a similar political role to the child. In one of the journal entries in

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 259-60.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

*Summertime*, Jesus is described as ‘indifferent to politics’, and he has set the example for his followers on ‘how to live one’s life outside politics’.<sup>74</sup>

### **Speaking the Body, Speaking the Cracks of Language**

The conversations between Simon and David in *The Childhood of Jesus* allude to some of the significant fields of knowledge in which Coetzee himself is trained, including structural linguistics and mathematics. In addition, platonic dialogism and Biblical intertexts are woven into the playful tone of the childish language adopted in their conversations.<sup>75</sup> Coetzee’s literary indebtedness to Cervantes and *Don Quixote* is also an important motif.<sup>76</sup> While Simon teaches David to use language, to count, and to read, David constantly shows his unwillingness to fully imbibe Simon’s teaching. The following conversation happens when Simon is fixing a blocked toilet in Ines’ home.

‘What’s an undertaker?’ asks the boy.

‘An undertaker undertakes the care of dead bodies. He is like a plumber. He sees the dead bodies are sent to the right place.’

*And now you are going to ask, what is a dead body?*

‘What are dead bodies?’ asks the boy.

‘Dead bodies are bodies that have been afflicted with death, that we no longer have a use for. But we don’t have to be troubled about death. After death there is always another life. You have seen that. We human beings are fortunate in that respect. We are not like poo, that has to stay behind and be mixed again with the earth.’

‘What are we like?’

‘What are we like if we are not like poo? We are like ideas. Ideas never die. You will learn that at school.’

‘But we make poo.’

‘That is true. We partake of the ideal but we also make poo. That is because we have a double nature. I don’t know how to put it more simply.’

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<sup>74</sup> *Summertime*, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> See Valeria Mosca, ‘Ideas and Embodied Souls: Platonic and Christian Intertexts in J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Childhood of Jesus*’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 20 (2016), 127-38.

<sup>76</sup> See Maria J. Lopez, ‘Miguel de Cervantes and J. M. Coetzee: An Unacknowledged Paternity’, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 29 (2013), 87-97.

The boy is silent. (p. 133)

In the succinct questions and answers between the father and the child, universal and abstract ideas of 'death' and 'ideals' are confronted with the materiality of the human body, particularly the body's wastes.<sup>77</sup> While adhering to his own language about bodies and poo, the child shows minimal response to Simon's teaching. His silence, which is a persistent gesture throughout the novel, to some extent echoes Friday's silence in *Foe*. Susan Barton's attempts to teach Friday to write and speak in the same way fail to receive positive responses from him. But the child does speak in the novel. His playful and mischievous speech in a self-implicating manner becomes a persistent disruption and challenge to Simon's own position in the Symbolic Order of language. Here, for example:

'What language do you want to speak?'  
'I want to speak my own language.'  
'There is no such things as one's own language.'  
'There is! La la fa fa yam ying tu tu.'  
'That's just gibberish. It doesn't mean anything.'  
'It does mean something. It means something to me.'  
'That may be so, but it doesn't mean anything to me. Language has to mean something to me as well as to you, otherwise it doesn't count as language.'  
In a gesture that he must have picked up from Ines, the boy tosses his head dismissively. 'La la fa fa yam ying! Look at me!' (p. 186)

David's own language consisting of his childish gibberish and his bodily gesture of tossing his head suspends the meaning and reason of Simon's language and exposes the way in which language as a structure of signs has to make meaning by excluding other forms of signs as childish nonsense. The child's stubborn adherence to his own language also makes visible a possible position of counter-discursive critique from within the language of the adult and through

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<sup>77</sup> Jed Esty has an insightful discussion about the way in which excrement functions as a governing trope in postcolonial African fictions. See Joshua D. Esty, 'Excremental Postcolonialism', *Contemporary Literature*, 40 (1999), 22-59.

the voice of nonsense.

Such a position of the child, indicating the Lacanian position of 'lack' and 'no thought' and Coetzee's own nonposition, is manifested in David's recurrent concern with an unintelligible 'crack' between things that are supposed to be naturally and fixedly connected. The first time David mentions this crack is when Simon and him are on their way back to the Relocation Centre.

'No. I don't want to fall into a crack.'  
'That's nonsense. How can a big boy like you fall down a little crack like that?'  
'Not that crack. Another crack.'  
'Which crack? Point to the crack.'  
'I don't know! I don't know which crack. Nobody knows.' (p. 35)

In Simon's understanding, when David uses the word 'crack' he is referring to the concrete cracks on the road he has been hopping to avoid. But it turns out that the child denies such a reference and furthermore rejects even the possibility of explaining and pinning down the meaning of his reference. Speaking from David's language, the word 'crack' itself points to the instability of signification in which the exact meaning of the word is constantly deferred. The child's persistent worry about falling down the gap or the crack marks not only the boundary of the totality of the linguistic system but also questions the absolute validity of numeric rules. When Simon is explaining to David about the numeric order and the infinite and sequential nature of numbers by counting the stars in the sky, David stubbornly expresses his fear of falling down the cracks among numbers.

'There is! You don't understand! You don't remember anything! A number can fall out of the sky like Don Quixote when he fell down the crack.' [...]  
'They do fall! They fall down cracks and you can't see them any more because they can't get out. You said so yourself.' (p. 178)

For the child, his position outside the numeric system works in the same way as the linguistic system. Both, on the most basic level, demonstrate the symbolic working of signs, the laws of which are acquired rather than inborn. It is by tracing back to childhood, in which teachings of the laws have not yet fully solidified, that the boundaries and instabilities of these systems emerge. In an entry named 'On Zeno' in *Diary of a Bad Year*, through reflections on teaching children to count, J. C comes to question the absolute validity of a sequential numeric system as the founding law of mathematics. As he writes:

The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others), which we believe or hope to be a key to the structure of the universe, may equally well be a private language—private to human beings with human brains—in which we doodle on the walls of our cave.<sup>78</sup>

It seems that the numeric system, as 'a private language', is also part of the Symbolic Order in which abstract laws keep their dominance through means of power and exclusion.

The symbolic significance of the unintelligible lack as the failure of language is further illustrated in literature and imagination in the novel's allusion to *Don Quixote*. After reading to David the episode called 'The Cave of Montesinos', in which Don Quixote is being lowered into a hole in the earth, Simon asks David why he is turning the pages of *Don Quixote* so quickly. David answers:

'Because. Because if I don't hurry a hole will open.'  
'Open up where?'  
'Between the pages.'  
'That's nonsense. There is no such thing as a hole between the pages.'  
'There is a hole. It's inside the page. You don't see it because you don't see anything.' (p. 166)

In the narrative of *Don Quixote*, the hole is a real, material one, to which the character Don Quixote has physical access. The child's grasp of the meaning of

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<sup>78</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 96.

this hole inscribed in writing is again disrupted as unintelligible. The hole between the pages, as the crack among the bricks on the road and among the stars, makes visible the child's sense of physicality that escapes the adult's spectrum of perception as clear and distinct thoughts pinned down by language. Its location 'between the pages' and 'inside the page' particularly reveals the textual medium through which language fails to maintain its seamless and all-encompassing apparatus in function. This hole between the pages in *Don Quixote* that only a child can see has relevance to Coetzee's own fictions, and their self-reflexive gesture of a political nonposition as critique. It also brings us back to the end of his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, when his allusion to *Don Quixote* is related to the South Africa situation. The South African writer shares the same predicament with Don Quixote, as Coetzee puts it, in 'the power of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body'. While Don Quixote seems to cede his imagination to reality and find truth in his death, in South Africa 'there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination'.<sup>79</sup> The hole between the pages of *Don Quixote* is also what art cannot say about bodies and about politics, especially in a place where the political demands on art have been particularly intense. Near the end of *The Childhood of Jesus*, when the child is asked to write 'I must tell the truth', David, instead, puts down 'I am the truth' (p.225). It is as if the truth that cannot be formulated in any political position and is too much for art to hold is to be found in an endless reaching out towards the voice of a child.

## Conclusion

Coetzee's origin as a white South African writer has always been an intricate

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<sup>79</sup> *Doubling*, p. 99.

issue in his writing, partly because of his refusal to commit his novels to the political situation in South Africa. However, embedded in his highly self-reflexive metafictional practice, this gesture of withdrawal from committing to any categorical alignments—place, race, and nation—is precisely rooted in his engagement with South African politics not only as a national phenomenon but also because of the global resonances it evokes. The political rationale behind this nexus between the universal appeal of his novels and their underlying local specific genesis becomes more apparent in his late and post-apartheid writing through the figuration of the child. His generic critique of literary forms and epistemological systems (pastoralism, autobiography, Romanticism, poststructuralism, and metaphysics), and his ethical critique of the discourse of confession are both deeply seated in his metafictional examination of the politics of novelistic discourse—of the colonialist forms of power situated within it. The child's narrative voice, which encapsulates the tension between materiality and representation, mirrors a critical perspective and a political (non) position that address the dilemma of a white South African writer as well as the ambiguity of literary discourse under the dictates of political strife. It is also by imagining a child's language, and a figure of the father being taught by the child, that such dilemma can be overcome and changes for the future become possible.



## Afterword

This project on narrative representations of the child in South African literature originally started from broader questions concerning the metaphorical resonance of the prevalent image of the child in postcolonial literature and in constructing conditions of 'postcoloniality'. Nevertheless, my focus on a specific national literature did not delimit the scope of my initial inquiries but rather opened up new routes of investigation that engaged with those broad research questions in more complex and interesting ways than I had anticipated. Firstly, during the process of my research, I have found out that the trope and symbolism of the child are deeply enmeshed in various ways in which national identities in South Africa are conceived, in its literary creations, cultural productions, and public imagination. The child, therefore, offers a particularly enabling perspective to reflect on discourses about race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality in South Africa's peculiar colonial and postcolonial circumstances, under the old dispensation of apartheid and the new democratic dispensation. Secondly, because of the retrogressive and anachronistic aspects of apartheid rule, South African politics and its culture of letters offer strong examples for the ways in which universal paradigms to describe and articulate postcolonial histories and identities are constantly complicated by local specific situations. Exploration of representations of the child, under these circumstances, becomes also examination of the ways in which the universal underpinnings and ideological implications of various intellectual currents that participate in the discursive formation of national identities are exposed and critiqued as problematic and contingent.

While my primary interest is in literary texts and novelistic discourse, the politics of literary forms have been a crucial aspect of inquiry throughout this

thesis. My close reading of writers and works against different historical and political backdrops pays special attention to the ways in which aesthetic dimensions, formal features, and stylistic and generic innovations are part and parcel of these writers' political and social critique. Embedded in these formal elements, figurations of the child and narratives of childhood in these works constitute significant literary tropes to imagine and invent new modes of subjectivity. For black writers associated with *Drum* in the 1950s, their autobiographies in exile disrupt the conventions of realism and subvert a linear temporality by highlighting the instability of childhood memory. By narrating the self as an entanglement of childhood and adulthood, these black autobiographies not only expose the developmental logic in apartheid's official discourse but also put to question the nativism and essentialism of Négritude, the paternalistic tendency of Liberalism, and the paradoxical construction of gender and masculinity in Fanonian black radical thought in the 1950s and 60s. In Nadine Gordimer's formal innovations of *Bildungsroman*, the figure of the child bears witness to a white writer's self-reflexive critique of the ideology of writing and the politics of the body. The trope of childhood in her novelistic discourse constellates the critical appropriation of the legacies and cultural politics of Liberalism, Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, the Black Consciousness Movement, and African nationalism. For Afrikaans-speaking writers in the historical moment of transition to democracy, the child figure in their confessional narratives of the self allows for an ironic mode of speech, which enables these writers to distance themselves from the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism while in the recognition of complicity. J. M. Coetzee's postmodern metafictional literary practice makes the ideological critique of literary forms an explicit thematic concern in his novels. The metaphor of the child is closely associated with Coetzee's critique of European pastoralism, the ideological underpinnings of confession, and the generic conventions of autobiography and allegory. It is also through these highly self-reflexive literary rewritings that the child figure envisions a new form of political participation

outside sectarian politics.

As a Chinese academic who worked on this project in a British university, I consider myself as an 'outsider', experientially, geographically, and epistemologically to some extent, to South African politics and literature. Although the process of working 'into' South African history and building intellectual connection with it has not been without confusions, frustrations, and difficulties, it also inspired critical questions that eventually shape the backbone of this study. South African writers' engagements with narrative configurations of national identities have always been negotiated with forces and intellectual currents from outside its national borders, with African nationalist thought, African diasporic thought, and the geopolitical order of the Cold War. Besides, coming from a non-Western country myself, my sensitivities toward the dynamic and tension between knowledge production in the West, or the Global North, and historical realities and experiences of the non-Western world and the Global South have also been deeply implicated in the process of writing this thesis. I am glad that the specific literary motif of the child has led me to the multifarious aspects and methodologies in South African literary studies. South African literature's wide-ranging transnational connections and potential for fruitful comparative studies, in particular, will doubtless continue to provide new directions for future scholarship.

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